Grace Balloch Memorial Library
Spearfish, S. Dak.
WITHDRAWN

WITHDRAWN

VAN PATTEN

By B. M. Bower

Good Indian
Lonesome Land
The Ranch at the Wolverine
The Flying U's Last Stand
The Heritage of the Sioux
Starr, of the Desert
Cabin Fever
Skyrider
Rim o' the World
The Quirt
Cow-Country
Casey Ryan
The Trail of the White Mule
The Voice at Johnnywater
The Parowan Bonanza
The Eagle's Wing
The Bellehelen Mine
Desert Brew
Meadowlark Basin
Black Thunder
Van Patten

VAN PATTEN

By

B. M. BOWER

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1926

905143

Copyright, 1926,
BY LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY.

All rights reserved

Published August, 1926

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

F
837
B67

CONTENTS

I.	Van Patten Rides to Paradise	3
II.	And Flees the Place Next Day	18
III.	A Small Damsel in Distress	27
IV.	And Another in Dire Trouble	43
V.	On the Trail of the Stolen Herd	54
VI.	Which Leads Straight to Lost Cabin	64
VII.	Vengeance of the Herd	76
VIII.	"Good Work!"	91
IX.	The LM Herd Goes South	100
X.	Blazing Star Learns the Feel of a Saddle	107
XI.	A Letter On the Corral Gate	116
XII.	Van Patten Takes the Trail Again	125
XIII.	The Trail Leads Into Hole-in-the-Wall	137
XIV.	Van Loses His Grub and Finds a Cabin	150
XV.	Hayfoot Has a Story to Tell	162
XVI.	A Little Passage at Arms	178
XVII.	Axes to Grind	189

Grace Balloch Memorial Library
Spearfish, S. Dak.

8691

XVIII. The Voice in the Grove - - 198
XIX. The Fox, the Goose and the Corn - - - - - 212
XX. "Jess Knows What Was Buried in That Grave!" - - 228
XXI. "There's Three of Us — and Only Two Guns!" - - 242
XXII. "I'm a Patient Woman—but I'll Shoot Him on Sight!" - - 249
XXIII. "A Horse Don't Lie ——" - - 262
XXIV. Hayfoot Hates to Bach - - 275
XXV. Marriage Licenses for Two, Please! - - - - 283

VAN PATTEN

CHAPTER ONE

VAN PATTEN RIDES TO PARADISE

" For every loss there is a gain,
'Tis happiness that follows pain —
For every cross–s – there is a crown —"

THIS was Lew Stanton's wife, singing in the kitchen over her Saturday baking, if the delectable odors carried by the breeze down past the bunk-house window were taken for evidence.

" Pieplant pie," Jim Wilson guessed aloud, his mouth watering involuntarily as he sniffed. " I'm gonna wait and ride in after supper. Dance'll be goin' good, time I get there, and that'll save me money. If I go in now I'll gamble. If I gamble, I'll lose. So'll you, Van. Can't win nothin' no more down in that burg. Better wait and ride in with me."

Van Patten, expertly sewing a button on the cuff of his newest clean shirt, glanced up, then back to his work.

"Aw, don't be so darn mouthy! " Jim expostulated, after waiting a minute. " I never seen such

a talkative cuss. If you're a dumb mute, wink twice for no and three times for yes. Now, by them signs, what's the grand rush to get to town in the heat of the day? You'll get into a game and lose all you got ——"

"For every loss there is a gain ——" sang Mrs. Lew, and Van Patten tilted his thumb toward her voice while he pulled more thread from the spool.

"You hear what the song says, Jim. I might lose a little money, but I bet I'll find out what kind of system them tin-horns are using. No loss without a gain, according to the song. That'll save you money, too. By rights, you oughta stake me to a few dollars."

"Nh-nh. If I'm goin' broke I'd ruther watch 'er fade myself. Besides, I seen a hull crock of cream in the spring-house this morning when I took in the milk. Pieplant pie drownded in cream — say, Van, that there beats stud poker."

"For them that likes pieplant, maybe. Too sour. Mrs. Lew don't get in sugar enough to suit me. Nope, I'll ride on in."

Jim fidgeted, eyeing Van Patten uneasily as that solemn-faced puncher proceeded to wriggle the shirt over his head.

"Aw, say, you better keep away from town, Van. There ain't no sense in leavin' this time of day. I can't go — I promised Lew I'd stay and do the chores." He watched Van Patten button the shirt cuffs and straighten the sleeves. When Van reached up and took his gun belt off the spike where it had hung so long that the creases were full of dust, Jim's anxiety spilled into speech of a franker sort.

"Aw, don't be a blamed fool, Van! If you've *got* to go huntin' trouble with that lousy cur-dog of a Ches Baker, for Lord's sake leave that gat to home! You go in with that on your hip, and you won't stand a Chinaman's chance. Ches has got too many backers, down around Paradise, that'd swear you made the first play for your gun. If you leave it hangin' right here on the nail where it always hangs, why ——"

"Why, I may get a kind word or two when I'm planted," Van finished for him. "I'm like you, Jim. I'd rather have a chance at the game, myself."

"No, you ain't like me," Jim countered sourly. "Not a darn bit, you ain't. Feller went around tellin' everybody he was goin' to run *me* outa town

next time I rode in, I'd take the hint and stay to home; 'specially if he owned the saloon and the barber shop and had a mortgage on the rest of the town. I wouldn't go pickin' no quarrel with him, that's a cinch."

Van Patten was critically inspecting three neckties, all slightly soiled and much wrinkled. Finally he discarded the three and, lifting the edge of the mattress, pulled out a folded newspaper and from it took a new tie of changeable red-and-green silk, dizzily and diagonally striped with blue.

"It ain't stylish to lay out the dead in colors," Jim remarked, eyeing the tie lugubriously. "Y' oughta wear black." He bit a corner off his tobacco plug and chewed without zest, as if the weed had gone tasteless in his mouth. "Or else leave the artillery to home," he added carpingly.

"And stay to home with it yourself," he finished, gathering courage from Van's silence. "You'll git killed, shore as you go packin' a gun. That's what Ches wants yuh to do, Van. It's what he made his war-talk for. You're playin' right into his hand."

"How about it if I was scared to ride into town

till after dark? That wouldn't be playing into his hand, would it? Ches has said a lot, but so far he ain't said I was scared."

"He'll kill yuh," Jim anxiously predicted. "Say, I'll drive up the cows and milk early, and I can have the chores done in an hour — be ready by four-thirty."

"What's the rush?"

"Well, hell, ain't you a friend of mine? Think I'll let you ride in alone and git beefed without nobody along to take a hand in the game? I got a gun of my own, you want to remember. You wait till I milk and I'll go with yuh, Van."

"Can't."

"Well, hell, I'll do the milkin' when I git back, then!" Jim knelt beside his bunk to pull out the battered grip which held his gun. "You darned fool, you can wait while I ketch up a horse, can't yuh?"

Van Patten stopped in the doorway and looked at him.

"You stay home, Jim," he said soberly. "I hope there won't be any trouble at all. There won't, if I have to start it. I expect Ches Baker to overlook the fact that I'm in town. If you go,

it will give some of his gang an excuse to butt in. You know Ches. If I went up to him and asked him how about it, he'd deny he ever said anything. If I don't go, he'll beller around that I'm afraid of him, and any time I did happen to run across him after that, there'd be trouble, sure. It ain't that I don't appreciate your offer, Jim; I want to go alone."

"He'll kill yuh, Van," Jim reiterated. "An' gloat over the chance to git away with it, you packin' a gun, and all."

There was a lengthy pause.

"Well — so long, Jim," Van said, stepping out of the door. "I'll see you at the dance."

"You'll see nobody at the dance!" Jim cried after him, furious because he could not find the cartridges for his gun. Shirts, socks, old letters, pink sleeve-holders and blue ones flew to the four corners of the room. He was positive that he had put the cartridges with the gun, though that was weeks ago when Lew Stanley's young nephew had visited the ranch, and Jim had used the proverbial ounce of prevention — once having been a horrified witness to an accidental shooting.

Perhaps his caution had impelled him to hide

the cartridges far from the gun. At any rate he could not find them, and since his gun was not the same caliber as Van's, it began to look as though the cows would be milked at the customary hour that evening. The misadventure made Jim so mad he cried.

"The darn fool — he'll git killed!" he blubbered over and over, without troubling to explain how his presence could prevent the tragedy.

Van himself was not worrying about being killed, his chief concern being a nice little problem of ethics. He couldn't help wondering how far an old, aching hunger for a certain girl would restrain a man — or should restrain him — in a quarrel deliberately fostered by the fellow who has won the girl.

Much as he hated him, Van did not want to fight with Ches Baker. If he did, Ches' wife, who had been Lea Moore, would probably believe that she was at least indirectly the cause of the trouble — and there was just enough in the assumption to add a measure of bitterness to Van's mood as he rode along the trail to town, staring straight ahead of him and seeing nothing whatever of the level plain tilted up toward the line of hills, dark

blue with their forests of pines, which rose in the distance. Instead he saw only too vividly the swift-changing pictures conjured before him by his shuttling thoughts.

Months ago he had heard a garbled story of how Lea had given up trying to reform her handsome husband and had gone home to her father's ranch. That was some time before Ches appeared in Paradise with a partner and had proceeded to gather together a choice gang of small-time gamblers — crooks, Van called them in his own mind.

Ches and his partner had landed with money, and they were making more. In the beginning Baker had leased a saloon but in the two or three months since his arrival he had acquired other property, until Jim Wilson was not far wrong when he said that Ches Baker had a mortgage on the town. Paradise was a quiet little place, and one could probably buy all of it without paying out any great sum.

There was nothing unlawful in the fact that Ches Baker was making money. Paradise needed new people with business enterprise, and the town seemed well enough satisfied. The boys from the

outlying ranches did no more than a normal amount of complaining when they rode home with empty pockets. The game was what lured them, and since Ches Baker had taken over the largest saloon and gambling hall no man need ever ride away from Paradise with money still burning his pocket for want of a chance to lose it. There was even a faro layout, with Ches himself dealing on Saturday nights, and betting there was lively — though likely to be unlucky. Wherefore, the general opinion was that Paradise had livened up. Ches Baker had friends enough, of a sort.

Jim Wilson would probably have forgotten all about the chores and would have armed himself with a pitchfork and followed Van as reinforcements if he had suspected the bitterness that lay back of the feud. Van Patten never told just how the quarrel started between Baker and himself, nor that it held a significance deeper than a dispute over cards.

Van rode up to the post-office, tied his horse to the hitch rail and went in to inquire for mail, as was the custom. There wasn't any, which was also customary. Deliberately following Paradise conventions, Van thereupon stepped back, placed

palms upon the counter and lifted himself up so that he could sit alongside the screened cage where half of a large cheese, the cut surface checked and oily, lay odorously awaiting the next knife thrust. He rolled a cigarette, scratched a match on the underside of the counter edge, dangled his lean legs and smoked.

Through long usage this was accepted as the proper behavior for young cow-punchers dwelling in peace with the world and with their own consciences. On a Saturday afternoon, a dance scheduled for that evening, this performance silently announced to all observers that one young fellow was at leisure and prepared to spend a few hours as pleasantly as circumstances would permit, and that he was in no great haste to pursue that fickle lady, Chance, nor to indulge in liquid refreshments.

But outside the store stood Van's sorrel horse with his ornate saddle, full-skirted and full-stamped and trimmed with silver wherever silver might be applied — after the gaudy fashion of saddles won in bucking contests — mutely testifying to Van Patten's presence in town. Ches Baker could not fail to recognize the outfit if he

looked forth from his saloon across the street. Moreover, the gun belt buckled around Van's middle with the end of the holster showing beneath the lower edge of his coat, caught the attention of more than one casual visitor to the store. Van had reason to suspect that due notice was carried to his enemy across the street. Within half an hour all Paradise would know that Van Patten was in town and that he was packing a gun. The next move was up to Ches Baker.

Van finished his smoke, slid off the counter, lounged over to the showcase opposite and somewhat apathetically inspected the display of ties, collars, gold-filled cuff links, pins and a box of cheap collar buttons. He bought a dime's worth of gumdrops from the showcase next to the haberdashery, and placed one gravely between his front teeth. Then, the bag stuffed negligently into his coat pocket, he lifted a hand to the nape of his neck, felt of his hair and went out and straight across the street, aware of at least four pairs of eyes that watched him through the open doorway.

The barber shop stood alongside the saloon. Van hesitated before the green half-doors of the

Big Four, then entered the shop and sat down in the chair nearest the window.

"I'll take a haircut," he said, with a small, mirthless smile for the palpable discomfort of the barber, who no doubt heard all of the town gossip. "Maybe a shampoo afterwards — I dunno yet."

In the mirror he could see who passed through the swinging half-doors of the saloon. So could the barber, and watched furtively while he fussed with the apron which was as concealing as Charity's cloak and might easily cover the stealthy drawing of a gun.

"In early for the dance, ain't you?" the barber ventured, not daring a closer approach to the subject now uppermost in the minds of every man who knew Van was in town.

"Wasn't working to-day. Lew took out the bunch of horses I've been breaking, and we ain't drove in any more yet. Do that Monday — maybe."

The barber knew how much lay behind that last word, and glanced into the mirror at the reflection of the street.

"Jim ride in with you?"

"He'll be in later on."

"Short or long?" The mirror got another glance as a man crossed the street.

"Short — but leave enough on top so I can part it."

Some one came out of the saloon. A disturbance of the apron resulted, and the barber sent a quick, furtive glance toward the rear door, plainly calculating the number of seconds it would take him to reach it.

Van flopped the apron, freed one hand and conveyed a large pink gumdrop to his mouth. The man who walked past was not Ches Baker.

The barber exhaled an audible breath and cut a notch in Van's hair that it would take Van a month to outgrow.

"I wear my ears this way all the time," Van hinted mildly. "Just trim the hair and let my ears go. They're pretty long, but I trim them in the fall."

"You wiggled your head," the barber explained apologetically.

Van Patten said nothing more. His attention was fixed upon the mirror, though with his head tilted forward while his back hair was being cut he

was obliged to peer in a sinister fashion up from under his eyebrows.

Men came and went, with now and then a rider loping into town and kicking up a flurry of dust. When no more could be done to the hair of Van Patten — unless the barber shaved it all off — and no image of Ches Baker had appeared in the mirror, he thankfully untied the apron and plied a small whisk broom with nervous zeal. Van got out of the chair.

"Ches Baker's in town, ain't he?" he suddenly asked, and the barber, nodding his head, short-changed himself thirty-five cents; which would seem to indicate that he was flustered.

Without looking at it, Van slid the change into his pocket, set another gumdrop between his teeth and went out. Baker, he was certain, knew that he was in town, and since he showed no inclination to make good his threat, Van decided to force the issue and be done with it.

Still leisurely chewing the glutinous candy he strolled into the Big Four and was halfway down the long room before he glimpsed the man he was looking for. His hand went mechanically into his coat pocket and Ches Baker fired — too hastily

for accurate aim, or else too slowly to catch Van Patten before he ducked to one side.

The crowd scattered, as always happens when men take their troubles to Colonel Colt for adjustment. But after that first shot the cylinder of Ches Baker's gun jammed for some inexplicable reason, and Van's finger hesitated on the trigger of his forty-four, held by a swift vision of a girl's face, and the look that would come into her eyes if she should hear that Van Patten had killed her husband.

As he pulled the trigger he dropped the muzzle of his gun, that had been looking at the top button on Baker's vest, and the bullet bored through the floor beside Baker's foot. Ches dropped his gun and went down in a heap and his cronies bunched around him. Two men grabbed Van Patten's arms from behind.

CHAPTER TWO

AND FLEES THE PLACE NEXT DAY

LATER that evening, listening dismally to the squeaking violins and the shuffling of feet in the hall over the post-office, Van wondered how his bullet could have worked such havoc that he must be hustled to jail and locked in a cell.

"If Ches dies the boys'll just about take the jail apart to get at yuh," the deputy sheriff had predicted as he pushed Van into the barred room behind the office and slammed the door.

Van did not see any immediate danger of Ches Baker's dying, but he knew Paradise fairly well, a fickle town, given to sudden and violent loyalties and to unreasoning antagonisms. Just now it was lavishing favors on the man who had brought money into the town, and any one who threatened their new idol would get scant sympathy.

Van knew well enough what to expect of it. Though half its houses had stood empty since the railroad had gone down the next valley and built a town of its own across the mountain, Paradise

was still the county seat and it had an excellent little jail that might be expected to hold a man safely until the next term of court. Also a judge that frowned upon gun fights and looked upon a verdict of not guilty as a miscarriage of justice.

"Just a stall to railroad me to the pen," he told himself bitterly. "Don't believe I touched the lying whelp. The way he went down showed plain enough he done it deliberate, and the way they ganged around him and packed him into the next room proved to me it was all a part of the play. Wish now I'd shot where I first aimed — seeing I'll get it in the neck, anyway."

Jim came later to the barred window and serenaded the prisoner with doleful complaints against a world that played such vile tricks with an inoffensive broncho buster and all-round good cowhand, and added a postscript or two of blasphemy against the town.

"I shore don't see how you're goin' to git outa this fix, Van," he mourned to the wailing accompaniment of the distant violins. "They say Ches Baker is bad hurt an' likely to die. Over at the Big Four they claim you walked in with your hand on your gun, lookin' for Ches. Seems

like you asked the barber if Ches was in town, an' that goes agin you, too.

"'Course, I don't believe all I hear, but looks to me like yo're headed fer the pen, whether Ches dies or not."

"If he dies it'll be of heart failure," Van declared morosely. "I could of shot him, but I didn't. I just bounced a bullet off the floor in front of him. That ain't fatal unless it might scare him to death."

"Mebbe — but it shore looks tough, you packin' a gun when you ain't in the habit of doin' it. You'd oughta left it to home like I told yuh to, Van. You'd be over there in the hall dancin' right this minute, chances is, if you'd done like I said. You'd oughta waited anyhow till I could come along."

"Aw, go on off and shut up!" Van said ungratefully, as he turned away from the window and sat down on the iron cot. Jim Wilson was probably the stanchest friend he had in the place, but he could get on a man's nerves like a door slamming intermittently in a wind. No one objects to doors when without squeaking they perform the service for which they were made, but

they can set one's teeth on edge at times. It was so with Jim; a fine fellow, but congenitally tactless.

By midnight Van was wondering if he had not been unnecessarily harsh with Jim, who if properly coached might have managed somehow to get at the truth about Ches Baker, whom Van did not believe was hurt at all.

Ten minutes later, Jim was back at the window, evidently incapable of harboring resentment.

"Swiped this much chicken off'n the dance supper table," he announced, vaingloriously pushing two drumsticks and a gizzard between the bars. "Got a custard pie too, but I couldn't figure out any way to get it to yuh, so I et it m'self.

"Boys are all talkin' about the shootin'. Ches' pardner says Ches is bleedin' inside and liable to die. They ——"

"Bleeding inside what?" By standing on his toes Van could peer out at Jim who had pulled a barrel under the window, the night being dark.

"Well, I dunno — they won't let nobody see him, an' the Big Four is locked tighter 'n a drum since the dance started, on account uh wantin' quiet around there. They got 'im in the back

room. If he dies, they's talk of a lynchin' — but I dunno. A lot of the boys likes yuh, and they know Ches told around 't he was goin' to run yuh outa town. I don't hardly b'lieve they'd try a lynchin'."

Van Patten said nothing — a habit he had learned from having mind and heart too full for speech.

"You oughta have a gun or somethin', in case they do come after yuh," Jim went on. "I couldn't find the shells to mine — but here's a king-pin off'n one uh them big, heavy road scrapers. I thought mebbe you could cache it in your clothes; might come in handy."

"Thanks, Jim." Van's mouth twitched at the corners as he fondled the heavy iron pin with square head — an ugly weapon at close quarters. "It may be useful."

"They do a lot uh braggin' about this jail," Jim observed, in a tone that belittled the structure. "But I know one of the fellers that helped build it. It ain't such a much, come right down to it. These here bars ain't what they're cracked up to be, accordin' to him. Folks calls 'em steel, but they ain't. They're iron, he says."

"Then bring me a hack saw, can't you?"

"I dunno as I can, much b'fore to-morrow night, Van. I'll look around an' see if I c'n git hold uh one in town. If I have t' ride on home after that 'n in the blacksmith shop, I'll have t' wait an' sneak it in to yuh after dark. I couldn't make it there an' back b'fore daylight if I was to start now."

"All right, Jim. Bring me some more grub, if you can get hold of any."

"Shore will——" Jim stopped as if he had been choked. There was a brief, scuffling sound, and then silence punctuated at intervals by shouts and coarse guffaws of laughter from the main street down in front of the post-office.

Van returned to the cot bed and sat down, weighing the big king-pin in his hand. A god-send, if the chance came to use it.

That chance came late the next morning when a bleary-eyed deputy sheriff arrived with breakfast. Van would have preferred an hour later in the day for his attempt to escape, but since he was not consulted in the matter he took what the fates gave and made the best of it.

Just after an all-night dance is not so bad a

time for a jail break, after all. The deputy had danced hard and drunk harder, and the cell seemed very dark after the brilliant sunlight. As he turned and groped with one hand for the foot of the cot and set down the big, rusty milkpan which served as a tray, Van clenched his teeth against a certain squeamishness, and struck.

The deputy dropped, limp as an empty sack. Van drank the turgid coffee in a few great gulps, crowded the fragments of a soggy loaf into his pocket, took the keys and went out, closing the door after him and locking it. The deputy had moved a foot — Van did not care to wait for further signs of recovery.

In the office his own gun and belt hung on the wall over the desk. As he buckled the belt around him he looked out of the window and saw that the street was clear. Then he walked out, locked the door and tossed the keys into a clump of weeds by the roadside. So far it had been perfectly simple.

He did not know what had been done with his horse, but on the chance that Jim had looked after the sorrel, he cut across lots to the livery stable and entered by a rear door.

Like the rest of the town, the stable wore an air of Sunday somnolence with not a soul in sight. A few horses dozed in the cool, dusky stalls, sleepily stamping at the droning flies. The sorrel's head jerked up when Van's shadow struck across the floor just inside the doorway, and the quivering nostrils belled and nickered a greeting which at any other time might have brought the stableman to the spot.

But the stableman was sitting in the shade of the wide eaves outside the office door, at the front of the stable, his hat pulled low over his eyes and his favorite waltz rhythmically thrumming through his half-waking dreams. The welcoming nicker of a horse in a far-away stall would mean nothing to him just then. Neither did he heed the brief sound of shod hoofs clumping along ten feet of plank floor.

When he had the sorrel safely outside, Van drew a long breath, though he would need his rabbit foot for another ten minutes. In the shelter of the building he mounted, then rode straight back toward the little stream that flowed through brush and thin willow growth next the line of hills.

Because he knew that he would find his own

weapon in the office he had not taken the deputy's gun — a blunder, as he saw it now. For although it would probably be some time before the jail was opened, there would be nothing to hinder the deputy from attracting the attention of some one outside by shooting through the cell window and putting men on Van's trail. It all depended on the deputy's presence of mind. Van hoped that it would not be present for a time at least.

Some one shouted just as Van rode in among the willows, but a hasty glance over his shoulder showed no one in sight. He jumped his horse into the ford and out on the other side, then headed for a bushy gully which would lead him into a network of rocky gulches and ravines that twisted far into the hills.

The sorrel was fresh and he was fast. Van eased him down a steep bank and into an old cow-path, deep-worn and smooth. The sorrel tossed his head and broke into an easy lope, winding in and out among the bushes and leading always up into the higher gulches.

"Let 'em follow if they can!" Van laughed to himself, and settled himself for the long trail that lay ahead.

CHAPTER THREE

A SMALL DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

A WEEK later, in that brief, enchanted interval between sunset and dusk, when every harsh outline of hills or scraggy woodland was softened and faintly blurred with enthralling tints of violet and rose, Van Patten rode slowly up a widening valley where a lazy little stream meandered here and there through clumps of cottonwood and quaking aspen and tall chokecherry bushes with branch tips drooping under growing clusters of fruit. Little brown birds with yellow throats fluttered up from the grass before him as he rode along, and from the bushes tangled with wild grapevines sleepy twitterings told where anxious little mother birds hushed their nestlings for the night.

Farther up the creek the hoarse rumbling of a bull, engaged in heavy-voiced challenge to his bovine world, brought the sorrel's ears tilting forward. Van could feel the nervous twitching of the sweaty hide and the unconscious springiness

of the knees which told how well the range-bred horse knew that muttering note portended a battle.

Since he was riding in strange territory and taking nothing whatever for granted, Van loosened his gun in its holster and rocked the saddle gently with his shifting weight from stirrup to stirrup, testing the tightness of the cinch. Not quite satisfied, he swung off and, hooking the stirrup over the horn, gave the latigo a yank or two. Up the creek was the trail he meant to ride, and it would take more than a range bull on the rampage to make him change his mind. But for all that he was too old a range hand to neglect certain little precautions. One never knew. A charging bull is easy enough to dodge in open country, but a horse may stumble, or he may be a shade too slow. Van Patten had seen horses gored until a bullet was the merciful end of the affair for the horse. He had no mind to be set afoot now, nor to be forced to add horse-stealing to the counts against him, so he rode watchfully after that.

The big sorrel — Spider was his name — went forward with little dancing steps, eyes rolling this

way and that, watching the bushes; ears twitching forward and back, nostrils flared and quivering. Every nerve in the big, smooth-muscled body was tense as a fiddlestring, thrilling to the adventure.

Van Patten leaned and patted the sorrel's neck, wet from a long day's travel, and the horse tossed his head and pulled at the bit, eager for action. Van spoke to him reassuringly in an undertone, mindful of the possibility that human ears might be listening.

As they advanced, the hoarse bellowing seemed to come from beyond a thicket of wild currant and chokecherry bushes. Van pulled up and listened for the profane shouting of impatient riders, but what held him in the quiescence of complete astonishment was the shrill voice of a child raised in angry expostulation.

"Go 'way, you mean ole ugly bull, you! Get out! You fink you're smart, frowin' dirt over your back! You fink vat scares me! When my mamma knows how you act wif me, she'll shoot you dead! Ven you'll be sorry, I s'pose. Go 'way! Don't you *dare* come ——"

Van caught the note of panic in the baby voice,

knew that the crisis had come. He whipped out his gun and lifted Spider forward with his spurs.

At bay against a tree in a little grassy glade, clinging to the rough bark with both baby hands flung backward, a little girl stood face to face with a big Hereford bull that was working himself into a slavering rage — because of her pink apron, perhaps. Too terrified to move, yet trying her best to hide her alarm, the child's face was blanched with horror and her eyes wide and glassy, as she boldly upbraided the murderous brute in a voice that trembled on the verge of screaming.

"Hi, there!" Van let out a yell and charged the bull in a whirlwind rush that forced the animal in sheer surprise to give ground. As he went by the tree, Van leaned and swept the child up in the crook of his arm.

On the far side of the little clearing he would have stopped and set her before him in the saddle, but the sorrel wheeled and went galloping back as the maddened bull lunged at him.

With both hands full Van could do nothing at the moment save ride. To be sure, he could shoot — but the bull was a valuable beast, even if he was a dangerous one, and Van was a fugitive rid-

ing in country strange to him. He did not want to shoot if he could help. He let Spider handle the situation for the moment, and set the little girl before him in the saddle, where she promptly seized the horn with both chubby hands and hung on, every motion of her body betraying perfect familiarity with her position.

"He's a mean devil!" she cried excitedly. "He's a YT bull and he killed a horse. It was gray and — and yellah. He hooked it."

"He won't hook my horse," Van promised, helping Spider dodge a blind rush and an upward toss of the wicked horns.

"No — 'cause vis horse can run *fast!*" praised the little lady, her blond curls flying as Spider gave a great leap ahead.

"He broke our fence," she continued, during the short interval that followed, when the bull stopped to fling dirt and deep-throated defiance at his foes. "He come along and dest *smashed* it. And my mamma put some salt in the gun and shot him. And he dest went *sailin'* up the hill! I bet," she added gloatingly, "he wished he'd stayed to home!"

"I expect," Van indulgently agreed, leaning

past her to see if he could untie his rope and use it with one hand.

"You going to wope him?" the child inquired interestedly, keeping one eye on the bull. "I guess he's comin' at us again. He's shakin' his head dest wike vat!"

Arguing with a savage bull, Van discovered, was awkward work while carrying a child in the saddle; even a child who seemed perfectly able to keep her balance without help. He could not set her down anywhere, for there were no boulders upon which she would be safe; and the trees surrounding the glade were mostly slender-branched saplings tangled in vines and bushes. Her only security was there on the horse, in the shelter of his arms.

The bull charged, a swift onslaught that came near catching Spider off his guard. The wicked horns, jerking upward with all the vicious power of that great neck, gave a vivid pantomime of the slashing thrust that would rend and kill if those horns once contacted flesh.

Van thrust Spider away with a quick pressure of his knee, caught the child closer with his left arm and fired. The bull fell forward, one horn

snapping short off next the head as his great weight drove it into the sod. He lunged up and stood slavering foam from his loose lips. Blood trickled down the dingy white face in tiny rivulets like sanguine tears. A front leg dangled, broken below the knee.

For the second time in six weeks Van had deliberately lowered his gun as he pressed the trigger, because he did not want to kill. It had occurred to him that in this grassy glade with the stream running along one side in a shallow, gravelly bed, a crippled animal could live indefinitely and perhaps grow in wisdom as his hurt mended.

Van gave a long glance at the great brute standing there in sullen passivity, all the fight knocked out of him.

"Go ahead and beller!" he urged grimly. "You won't be pawing dirt for a while, anyway — and if you can't paw your courage up, you can't fight."

"I bet he's sorry now he was so mean!" said the little girl, in a tone of malicious satisfaction. "I dest wish he'd knock ve ovver horn off. Ven he *couldn't* hook."

"He'll study a while before he tries it with

one," Van said, and turned Spider away. "Whereabouts is your house, girlie?"

"It's away-ay over vat way." The child flung out an arm and pointed up the creek. "Ten miles," she added gravely.

"Yeah? Little girls hadn't ought to go off so far without their mammas. Or their papas."

"My mamma couldn't come. Her's sick. And my papa couldn't eever. He's gone away off. And some bad mans stole all my mamma's horses, and stole my wittle pony. I've got to find my wittle pony so I can get ve cows for my mamma to milk."

"Good Lord!" Van ejaculated under his breath. "Don't you know little girls mustn't go off alone like this? A snake might bite you."

"A snake couldn't bite me ven I find my pony," countered the child. "My wittle pony's *vat big!*" And she spread her arms to show him. "He can run *fast*, like your horse. Your horse can run fast, can't he?"

"Mm-h'm. What's your name?"

"Marylee," she told him, making one word of two. "Will you help me find my mamma's horses and my wittle pony?"

"Sure. I expect your mamma's worried about you right now. How long you been gone?"

"Ten days," she told him promptly, and he squeezed her up close and laughed, a new warmth in his tone, matching the glow in his eyes. To a man as lonely as Van Patten there was something inexpressibly sweet in the touch of that soft little body swaying to the motion of the horse, her curls lifting in the night breeze.

Her artless chatter, winsome as the twittering of the birds, unconsciously sketched a fair picture of the lonely life she lived on the "wanch" with her father gone "way-ay off and never comin' back." Van somehow received the impression that her father was dead, but the child evidently took his going as a matter of course and felt no grief for his absence.

She had started out all by herself, it seemed, to find her mamma's horses that the bad mans had stolen, and her wittle pony which she would ride back home when she found him. The other horses would go right straight home, she declared. She would drive them with her wittle pony, that would stand still beside a rock and let her climb on his back. Her mamma always let her ride her

wittle pony to bring the cows, and she was her mamma's top hand. Her mamma rode a big tall horse, and it was brown and had a question mark in its forehead, so her mamma called it lots of funny names when her head didn't ache so her was too sick to laugh. Her mamma called her big black horse Hunh, when her felt well. And her called him Query other times. The bad mans had stolen Query, and Marylee was going to find him and take him right straight home again, and shut the corral up *tight*.

Van pictured what would have happened in another few minutes if no help had come for Marylee.

" I guess God's looking after you, all right," he said, speaking what was in his mind.

" God's wookin' after mamma's horses too," said Marylee simply. " God's everyfere, only we can't see Him. He's up in the sky and He's in the trees and He's on the ground, even. Your horse is steppin' on Him, but it don't hurt."

Van laughed and would have led her into further metaphysical discussion, but a straggling fence zigzagging through the brush halted Spider and turned Van's attention to practical things.

He reined the horse toward the hills, found a corner and a trail leading alongside the wires. Into this he turned, sure that it would lead straight to corrals or ranch buildings.

"Vis is our fence," Marylee announced with some pride. "Up by the gate is fere vat mean ole bull smashed it and my mamma shot him."

"Yeah? Your ten miles were pretty short," Van chuckled, relieved to discover that they were nearing the child's home and a mother whose frantic anxiety he had been dreading to see.

"Maybe it wasn't ten miles," Marylee said gravely. "I guess it was fifteen."

"I expect. And maybe your mamma is worried about you and thinks you're lost."

"Her was asleep. Her cried when the bad mans stole all our horses, and her got a headache and waid on the bed and cried, and ven her went to sleep. And I was goin' to get all the horses for a s'prise when her woke up. But I never did. Vat mean ole bull come along and was goin' to hook me. But you wouldn't wet him hook me, would you? You wouldn't wet him hook wittle girls."

"No, I wouldn't." No man had ever heard just that note in Van Patten's voice, which was habitually even and without emotion. Now it had an odd huskiness which caught the child's attention and made her turn and look up at him curiously, her eyes shining in the deepening dusk.

"You're my friend," she said. "I wike you and I'll wet you wide on my wittle pony ven you find him. Will you wet me wide on vis horse, all by myself?"

"I would, but he bucks sometimes. He might buck you off and hurt you. I wouldn't want you to be hurt."

"Vat's vis horse's name?"

"Spider."

"My wittle pony's name is William. Vat's your name?"

Van hesitated. He had coined a name which he meant to use until he was safe away from any chance of being hunted by the Paradise sheriff, but that borrowed name stuck in his throat now when this child waited, her big round eyes shining in the gloom.

"Van Patten," he said, his voice lowered.

"God bless Van Patten an' keep him safe f'om harm," said Marylee softly. "Vat's in my prayers. 'God bless mamma an' papa an' gwampa an' all our friends, an' God bless Van Patten an' keep him safe f'om harm.' Are you God bless Van Patten?"

Van Patten's throat pinched together.

"No, I guess not," he answered her slowly. "This your gate?"

Marylee nodded violently.

"An' vat's our cows, come home vere own selfs."

"Marylee? Ma-ry-*lee-e?*" Through the dusk a woman's voice called, bell-clear, throbbing with eagerness, just ready to turn anxious; as if her mother heart was beginning to chill with a vague alarm which her reason would not harbor.

"Marylee? Where *are* you, honey girl?"

"I'm a-comin'," Marylee shrilled answer, as Van Patten leaned and set her down beside the gate, under the lower bar of which she crawled.

"Marylee, why didn't you answer mamma the first time? You mustn't go so far from the house that you can't hear mother call. Where have you been, sweetheart?"

Under cover of Marylee's voluble recital of her adventures and the hysterical barking of two dogs of the collie breed, Van Patten dismounted and fumbled with the gate fastenings, killing what time he could. Lea Moore's voice he would know in Patagonia—or Lea Baker, she was now. A little richer and deeper, that voice; less girlishly care free. Nevertheless it was the same.

"— An' he dest *shot* vat mean ole bull, and it falled wight down on its face! An' it b'oke a horn off and now it's all bleed. An' he's God-bless-Van Patten, and his horse is Spider and he's goin' to find my wittle pony."

"Van Patten?" The woman walked toward the gate, her very steps eloquent of eager surprise. "Is it really? Why, Van, how are you?" Her hand went out in welcome. "Come right in, and have supper with us — though it will be mostly bread and milk, I'm afraid. I never cook much when Ches is gone. Babe loves milk so well. And what is this story about the YT bull? Did you shoot it, really?"

"Yes, ma'am, I had to do it. But only in a foreleg, to take his mind off wanting to fight. I came to bring little Marylee home, and to get the

straight of this bunch of horses the kid says were stole off the ranch. I might be able ——"

"Thank God you came, Van. I knew He'd send some one along, but I never dreamed it would be you." The quiet sureness of her tone showed that the simplicity of her faith had not dimmed in the years since he last saw her. "It happened last night, and I'm absolutely afoot. Even old William — you remember the old gray horse that used to pack game out of the hills for dad? — even he's gone; though he's so stiff and crippled up I'm sure they won't get far with him. He'd play out in ten miles, the way they'd drive."

"No, sir!" Marylee's voice rose in shrill protest. "My wittle pony can run *fast!*"

"Well, to be sure he can!" Marylee's mother hurriedly retracted. "But he wouldn't run very fast or very far, honey, when he knew they were taking him away from home. I expect he'd begin to limp right away, and go hobbling along."

Pacified, Marylee went dancing along the trail to the log cabin, holding fast by her mother's hand. Van followed, wondering what manner of men would rob a woman — leave her stranded,

alone and with a child, so far from help. Ten miles, she told him it was, to the next ranch, and no way of getting there unless she walked and carried Marylee.

CHAPTER FOUR

AND ANOTHER IN DIRE TROUBLE

WHILE he ate bread and milk at Lea Baker's little kitchen table, Van caught himself wishing that he had not shot so low that night in the Big Four. He had known Ches Baker for a scoundrel, but he had not believed that even Ches could be guilty of such a thing as to leave his wife and that lovable child alone here on the ranch while he gambled and domineered over a town a hundred miles to the south.

" Ches wanted me to sell the horses," Lea said, while she poured more milk into Van's bowl. " He wanted money to go into business of some sort in town. But dad gave me the bunch and I wouldn't part with them. They weren't any trouble to raise, for we never had to turn them loose on the open range, so there were never any round-ups to bother with, and I could always sell the four-year-olds unbroken for a fair price. None of them were mean or hard to break — I

broke one myself, a year ago this spring, for my own use.

"But whoever it was, they made a clean sweep. And one thing was strange. Neither of the dogs barked, last night. They're good watch dogs and make a fuss if strangers come to the ranch, and the horses always come up for the night under those cottonwoods just below the creek. It's a knoll, and there's always a breeze blowing along the creek that keeps the mosquitoes down. In summer that is their bed ground, and the dogs range around at night and would hear any riders. There is just one explanation, Van. The dogs must have known those men, and the men must have known exactly where to find the horses."

"If the dogs knew them, you would too if you got a sight of them, wouldn't you, Lea?" To save his life he could not bring himself to call her by the name Ches Baker had bestowed upon her.

"I suppose so. Yes, of course I should. These dogs of ours were raised right on the ranch and have never been off it. But no one comes here, much. Our nearest neighbor, Hans Hansen, speaks very little English and they keep to themselves. I don't suppose the Hansens come here

once a year. It isn't often any YT cattle get down this way. They range off east of here. But that old YT bull is an outlaw that has been deposed as king of the herd, and he goes off by himself and sulks and tries to bully the rest of the range. This creek bottom from the lower pasture up to the canyon is all our land. We have plenty of good bottomland up above here."

"You've had men hired here; you'd have to keep one man, anyway! Two, part of the time. And what about haying? Don't you hire that done?"

"But that's contract work, Van. A man and his boys — they live over beyond Hansen's — come and put up the hay, and board themselves in a cabin up the creek about a mile. I'm sure they wouldn't steal so much as a pitchfork off the ranch.

"With the horses under fence, and no horse-breaking done here, there isn't a great deal to do. Just watch the fences and that sort of thing. I have been doing all that myself. I used to take Babe in front of me on the saddle and ride for hours. Lately she's been promoted to old William. It's just poking up and down the valley —

no fast work. Our horses are all so gentle! I always start in when they're tiny colts, and halter-break them. There isn't a horse in the herd that won't lead. They all know us, and Babe or I can walk up to any one of them — even the stallion, Bay Omaha, is gentle; with us, at least." She stopped, dangerously close to tears.

Van picked up his spoon and began vaguely stirring his bowl of milk — evidently under the impression that it was coffee.

"So, you see, we didn't need any hired men. Ches had a man or two, part of the time, but we didn't need them at all, except to build corrals and sheds and so on. Since he left I've been getting along very nicely alone."

"Then you don't know of anybody that would run the horses off?"

"No, I don't."

"And still, the dogs didn't make any fuss! They barked a plenty when I rode up to the gate, and I had the little girl with me."

"I know." Lea Baker pressed a palm to her forehead with a gesture of utter weariness. "I've thought and thought, until I simply *can't* think."

"They didn't go down the creek and out that

way," Van observed, after a thoughtful period. "No sign of a horse herd. How many did you have, Lea?"

"All told, colts and all, there were just an even hundred and fifty head; not counting William and Query, that they took out of the corral. I always keep them up, in case of some sudden emergency."

By her averted eyes and the odd hesitation in her voice Van had a swift suspicion that a drunken husband coming home in a violent mood might create the sudden emergency she had in mind. But that subject was taboo — in his own mind, at least.

"Could they go out over the hills, straight east or west?" His pause had been so brief that the question seemed to flow smoothly after her reply.

"It would be possible, but scarcely practical. There are deep canyons to cross, going east. To the west is Hansen's ranch, and they'd have to pass through his very dooryard, or else travel for miles out of their way, up around Haskels Gorge. They went out to the north, I suppose. I think they very likely took the rustler's trail up into Montana. You know horses are driven back and

forth constantly; stolen in Montana and driven south and sold, and those stolen from this country are taken north into Montana. It's a regularly organized business, from all I have heard. And that, of course, means that my horses are gone for good."

"Oh, maybe not," Van disagreed, so slowly that the words seemed a drawl. "You carry the same brand——"

"Yes, the LM monogram."

"And now, how many broke saddle horses have you got in the bunch?"

"Well, there is Query, of course. You'd know him by the question mark in his forehead. He comes at a signal which no one knows but me. If you whistle this——"

Van's fingers closed slowly into his palm, for it was the boot-and-saddle call which he himself had taught Lea in the old days when he used to gallop to her father's gate, dressed up in his Sunday best and riding his top horse brushed to a satiny shine.

"If you whistle that he'll come." So far as Van could see she was totally unconscious of any possible significance for him in that call. "All

the horses will, for that matter, but Query knows it's the saddle-up call and he loves it. I carry lump sugar in my pocket. You wouldn't have any trouble catching him; you — you were always so good with horses."

Her clear, blue-gray eyes rested upon his as frankly as Marylee's innocent gaze, and Van pulled his lips into a smile.

"All right, that's one mount I'd be sure of, in case of an emergency. Any more?"

"Vere's my wittle pony," Marylee lifted a sleepy head to chirp generously. "You can wide my wittle pony. He can go *fast*."

"All right, that's two," Van soberly counted. "I guess I'll make out all right."

"But Van, you can't get them back alone, and you mustn't try," Lea protested, apparently just awakening to his purpose. "It — the thieves will be desperate if you overtake them, and ——"

"And they'll be off their guard," Van reminded her cheerfully. "They set you afoot, so they won't be looking for any one on their trail."

"But you might have trouble with them when you did come up with them. If you're going after them, you must stop by the Johnson place and

get a couple of the boys to go with you. You'll do that, won't you?"

"I'll take no chances, if that's what you mean." Van rose and set his chair neatly against the wall as his mother had taught him to do. "I'll say good night, Lea, and go make camp."

"You have a camp outfit, have you, Van?"

"Sure," lied Van, a wary glance going toward Marylee who might in her terrific frankness spoil the kindly falsehood by telling of the small bundle tied behind his saddle.

"Well, there's a bunk house down by the stable, and it's clean. You might put your blankets in there, unless you really prefer the sky for a roof. And you mustn't neglect your own business, Van, while you hunt those horses. It's a job for the sheriff. If you'll just notify the county authorities when you reach Casper, I'll be a thousand times obliged to you and you really needn't bother any more about it. I just had to tell somebody my troubles — I suppose that's only human. But you won't put yourself out to hunt them, will you? Promise me that, Van!"

"I won't put myself out a minute, Lea. I'm riding north, anyway." He stopped beside the

chair where Marylee was drooped sidewise, fast asleep with her spoon still clasped tight in her dimpled fist.

"She's a great little kid, Lea," he said, and lifted one curl on his forefinger. "She was going to find the horses for mamma, and drive them back with her 'wittle pony.' How old is she?"

"Not five yet. But she's been with me alone so much of the time that she seems older. Bless her heart — her wittle pony is only old William, and the very best he can do is a shambling trot and a pitiful kind of gallop! But he's as gentle as a dog, and actually seems to feel that he must take care of Babe. I've watched him herd the other horses away when she was in the pasture afoot. Not one would hurt her, but he seemed to be afraid they might. Poor little tad, she cried as if her heart would break when she found he was gone."

"Well, good night, Lea. I guess I'll be turning in."

"Good night, Van. I'll have breakfast ready early."

As unemotionally as that they parted, Lea with her clear eyes fixed upon his in frank friendship,

Van thinking of the wrong that had been done her, and of the dogs that had not barked at the marauders last night. He told her not to bother, because he was a pretty fair cook, himself. But as he made his way down to the corral where Spider was still busily stowing away good bluejoint hay, he was calculating the number of hours that must pass before the moon rose above the high ridge to the east and lighted the little valley so that he could trail the stolen herd.

With his saddle blanket he lay down beside the haystack with his face to the east, and almost at once dropped into dreamless slumber. But when the moon shone upon his face he rose, saddled Spider and rode away at an easy lope up the trail that crossed the pasture, so sure the horses had been driven out to the north that he did not once slacken his pace to look for tracks.

At the gate, which was more than a mile from the cabin where Lea and the little girl slept, Van spent some minutes in studying the ground in a wide half-circle beyond the fence. Satisfied, he straightened in the saddle and loped away up the road through the upper pasture.

Bold raiders, they! With only a woman and

child to contend with, they were not afraid to keep to the lonely trail that wound gently beside the twisting stream until, where the valley narrowed like a funnel to a rocky, straight-walled canyon, the road turned aside through another gate, climbed a hill and went on, always making for the north.

On that trail rode Van, the hoofprints of the herd pointing the way. In the full light of the moon he could see that the thieves had not hurried. There were young colts to consider and fussy mares to control — and only a woman and a child left afoot at the ranch, with ten miles to walk before they could spread the alarm and start the pursuit. So the raiders took their time and the horses traveled at ease. But Van Patten, with a month of trail work to harden the muscles and strengthen the wind of Spider — as tough to begin with as any horse on the range — rode swiftly along the ridge road and away to the north.

CHAPTER FIVE

ON THE TRAIL OF THE STOLEN HERD

One mid-morning Van halted in a deep, grassy glen where a spring gurgled ice-cold and clear as glass from a mossy fissure in a cliff. There he made coffee in an old can left from some previous camp, broiled a grouse on a forked stick held over the coals, and breakfasted, while Spider, released from the saddle, rolled over (to prove he was worth a hundred dollars, according to range traditions), got up and shook himself and then started feeding with a philosophical air of consummate reliance upon his ability to hold any trail his master wished to travel, and to keep his splendid body fit and fine for the work.

Van gave himself and the horse an hour by the watch, then painstakingly reset the saddle, making sure that no wrinkle in the blanket would hurt Spider's back during the long day's travel.

He was still on the trail of the stolen horses. Far back along the trail they had left the road but they were going slowly on account of the

young colts. Even Marylee's "wittle pony," the old and raw-boned William, could hold the pace the rustlers had so far set. Their absolute belief that they would not be followed, together with their evident desire to deliver the horses at their destination in perfect condition, made Van's pursuit absurdly simple — to a certain point.

Beyond that point he did not plan, except that Lea should have her horses that were so gentle, and little Marylee should continue to ride her "wittle pony" after the cows. The LM monogram brand should never be mutilated so long as he had brain and body to prevent the desecration. Just to think of such an iniquity made him grit his teeth and lean forward, twitching the reins in the signal which the big sorrel knew and obeyed with lengthened stride.

The trail of the horses swung wide of Casper, just as Van had believed it would do and, remembering that he was a fugitive, what he had hoped. He crossed Poison Spider Creek while the sunset was flaming across the sky, and knew that he was still hours behind the stolen herd. But he also knew that they would soon be bedding the bunch down for the night, so he rode until dusk blotted

out the trail. Then, beside a trickling brook, he unsaddled and turned Spider loose, trailing Van's rope. Spider would not leave camp in any case, but he might stray too far away for quick saddling if left to his own devices, and Van would take no risk of that.

With the horse busily cropping the tenderest grass that grew in the shade of the brush, Van boiled more coffee and cooked a rabbit over the coals. A couple of days ago he had ventured into a little town just before the stores closed for the night and had bought coffee, salt, a piece of bacon and a little flour. With these and plenty of tobacco and matches he was prepared to live in the hills for a month if necessary.

Now he was saving his bacon — speaking literally — by eating game. The flour he did not attempt to cook on this forced march. It was not the first time he had subsisted on a straight meat diet, and with the coffee he felt fairly well fed as he settled back to smoke and dream; perhaps also to sleep while he waited for moonrise.

It was very tranquil with a pensive loneliness down in that hollow by the brook. One by one the stars were going on night guard in the field of

greenish purple that roofed the wooded hills and the little glen. Insects hummed in the brooding silence like little boats of sound becalmed in a vast sea. Now and then Spider sneezed the dew from his nostrils, a shattering sound that startled all the little wild things into frozen quiet. Then the steady crup-crup-crup of his strong teeth nipping the grass blades would begin again, and presently Van would hear the faint scurryings of small rodents among the bushes.

He lay back and looked at the stars and wondered what lay along the trail ahead; the trail to the horses and on and on, winding away through the months and the years into the future. How would it all end? What was the purpose of life, anyway? Just a succession of days filled with hardships, small comforts, a little pleasure to dull the old ache of hopes unfulfilled, of great ambitions thwarted by small misadventures?

Here he was, twenty-eight years old in a few more months. He had always declared that by the time he was thirty he would be able to ride out from his own ranch and watch his own cattle feeding in scattered groups; five hundred head or such a matter — since he was a modest young

man and built his castles according to his needs. Slim young riders would gallop toward him, coming to get their orders for the day. He would make the rounds to see that all was well, and then he would ride home to his wife and the kiddies.

Van's eyebrows pinched together and he sat up and began to roll a cigarette, the range man's surcease of troubled thought. That dream was over; had been since he was twenty-one and some busybody had blurted the news that Lea Moore had married Ches Baker and they were on their way to Denver for their honeymoon.

Here he was, edging close to thirty years, and "on the dodge" because of Ches Baker; on the trail of Lea Baker's horses that were branded with the old brand and taught to come to the whistled call that had been his secret signal to Lea. His mouth twisted with a bitter kind of mirth at the sardonic jest fate had made of his life. All the things he had dreamed of for himself had been made the portion of his enemy, who lacked the ability to appreciate his blessings.

"Him!" Van snorted contemptuously. "Go off and leave that dandy little ranch — running water the whole damn' length of it, and wood and

grazing and meadow that'd make your mouth water — pretty a place as ever laid outdoors — and a woman like Lea for a wife, and that sweet little kid — quit 'em all and go run a cheap-john saloon and gambling joint — my God, the man's crazy as a loon!"

He ground a blazing match stub viciously under his heel — as perhaps he would have liked to grind Ches Baker — and took a tasteless puff or two at his cigarette.

"Leave that little woman and kid alone on that ranch miles from anybody — wide open to any damned skunk that took a notion to rob 'em! Leave 'em there — not knowing and not caring whether they're dead or alive — why, they might 've been killed, both of 'em! And only for me coming along when I did and the way I did ——"

He stopped there, struck by the inscrutable mystery of life, and how the loom of Fate will seize upon the slenderest thread of trivial incident and weave it into the pattern so cunningly that when all is done we wonder how the weaving would have been done without just that thread.

"If I hadn't called Ches' pardner on them marked aces, and if I hadn't got throwed in jail

and broke out again and had to go on the dodge, and hadn't hit for Montana, why, Lea might of been there a month before anybody come along, and she wouldn't have a chance in the world of getting her bunch of horses back. And the kid's 'wittle pony'—hunh! Funny, the way things work out."

He smoked and stared up at the stars for a long while. Then he added under his breath:

"She looks older—but finer; kind of noble, like a queen that's been sent into exile and won't let on she's homesick for the old castle. And that kid—Marylee!—God, what I wouldn't give for a kid like that!"

The lines beside his mouth softened with thoughts of that clear little voice gravely discussing grown-up affairs and boasting of the matchless speed and endurance of her wittle pony that had been a high-hipped, ewe-necked old horse seven years ago when Van had last seen him sedately bearing a hunter's pack. After a while he dozed and dreamed of other, happier times, and for a while forgot that he was a fugitive with his worldly possessions assembled in that lonely little hollow, his high ambitions sunk to wistful memo-

ries; a fugitive riding alone upon a hazardous mission, his sole reward the joy of serving, his future clouded with the misadventures of his past.

At last, when the moon came up, he awoke, saddled and rode on by moonlight, crossed rivers which the white radiance turned to silver, breasted steep slopes, rode down shadow-filled canyons; faced a crimson dawn, felt the sun grow hot on his right cheek, rode while it burned his shoulders.

So by devious trails that always swung sharply away from ranch or camp and clung to lonely upland country, he finally rode down a long ridge and crossed what he guessed to be a fork of Powder River, and knew of a certainty that the LM horses were being taken into Hole-in-the-Wall country just as Lea had declared, and that for every mile he rode before he overtook them he must add a bit of wariness, a greater keenness of sight — and he must also be sure that the horse between his legs had plenty of strength and speed.

With that in mind, he sought a secluded spot beside the stream, unsaddled and bathed Spider's back with cold water and sluiced his leg muscles well before turning him loose on the rope to graze. The stolen herd must have traveled steadily, with

few stops, for it was still some hours ahead of him. Just how far he could not tell, but he knew they must soon camp for the night or lose some valuable colts.

"Guess I'll have to turn coyote and trail along behind," he mused, as he measured out half his flour into the can he used for coffee, salted it, and stirred up a dough which he baked in primitive style on a hot rock beside the fire. From now on he would build no fires, and the bread he could eat as he rode. That and cold bacon would have to do until more satisfying food was possible. He knocked over a young "fool hen" with a rock, cleaned it and broiled it for his supper; toasted four slices of bacon and wrapped them hot with his bread.

That done he sat and smoked until Spider had satisfied himself to the point where he went daintily here and there, seeking the juiciest grass and the choicest morsels off certain bushes.

Van took his gun from its holster, ejected the shells and pulled the trigger several times swiftly. The simple mechanism worked as smoothly as the wheels of a good watch, and he wiped the shells and inspected each one before reloading. Since

he had no knowledge of who or what lay before him, he meant to take no unnecessary risk.

He stood for a minute looking speculatively at the big sorrel; he whistled, and Spider threw up his head and his heels and galloped half around the clearing before the rope snagged and brought him up snorting.

"Guess you'll do," he grinned, as he led the sorrel back to where the saddle lay on its side in the grass.

CHAPTER SIX

WHICH LEADS STRAIGHT TO LOST CABIN

VAN PATTEN knew the country around Hole-in-the-Wall and, it may as well be said now, the Wall country knew Van Patten. Four years can go far toward building a reputation in any community; make them reckless, bitter years with a maddening memory that must be pushed deep into the sluggish sea of forgetfulness, and the reputation is likely to prove a lasting if not a blasting one.

To see Van Patten sitting quietly at Lea Moore Baker's kitchen table, tranquilly eating bread and milk from a yellow bowl with blue stripes around it, one would scarcely realize just what that quiet surface had cost Van.

Four years of flashing temper alternating with seasons of morose silence — from Jackson's Hole to Laramie he had ranged, and men who remembered Van Patten would still rise unobtrusively from their chairs and start for the door if Van but turned his back to the bar and faced the crowd with a certain look in his eyes.

True, that was all in the past, and Van had gone calmly enough about his business of horse-breaking (he called it schooling bronks) for two years or more; ever since he left Thermopolis with the sheriff clicking stirrups with him and begging him to accept the position of deputy, the late incumbent having vacated the job suddenly and with exceeding permanence the night before. Thermopolis at that time was not looked upon with any enthusiasm by timid souls who loved peace and quiet, and that the town was not looking for a new sheriff that morning was due to Van Patten. Hence the offer of a star and certain hazards.

But restlessness had again seized Van and he declined the offer and rode away. His reason sounded strange to the sheriff — stagy and not quite plausible, though Van was perfectly sincere in giving it.

"Nope, thank you just the same. But if I stay around here I'll kill somebody, sure as the world. Come damn' near it last night. Nope, I guess I'm due to drift."

So the sheriff had turned back, riding first of all to the makeshift hospital to ask how were the two

men whom Van Patten had not killed — quite. He remembered, too, that in all the time Van Patten had ridden here and there through the country, he never had taken a human life.

The reason was simple, though the sheriff would never suspect it. Van never killed because he could not bear the thought of having the story of such a deed reach Lea's ears. He could not bear the look that he knew would come into her eyes if she should hear it.

Naturally, there were men up around Hole-in-the-Wall who did not love the name of Van Patten. These bore bullet scars on their persons and malice in their hearts, and perhaps Van thought of that hatred as he followed the trail of the LM herd up over the high prairies and into the wooded valleys toward Lost Cabin. At any rate his eyes grew more somber as he recognized certain landmarks familiar as his own saddle.

" Two years ain't long. Reckon I might have to beef somebody yet, before I get outa this damn' country," he mused, as he rode over the last ridge and saw the lights of Lost Cabin winking a specious welcome before him.

" Took the horses right into town, I see. Looks

bad. Looks like they aim to make delivery right here. Wonder what gang it is, anyhow? Well, I guess it don't matter so much who it is. If they've corraled the bunch in town they must aim to spend the night here, anyway. Brand the horses out to-morrow, maybe, and then run them down into the Wall to rest up and let the brands heal over, and then on up into Montana. That's how I'd work it if I was doing the job, anyway.

"Slick work; wish I knew who was doing it. Ain't lost a colt, or the old gray, even. Been knocking right along, too. Somebody that knows the country, and probably knows the horses.

"Well, I'll have to let the bunch rest up and feed, and rest up my own horse, so maybe I can spot the gang in some saloon. They'll be dry, after that drive. Drunk as hoot owls, by midnight, I'll bet money on it.

"Wonder who all's in town. Reese'd help, if I can get hold of him. So would Jockey Barrows. He's liable to be somewhere around. Might be able to pick up some one else that'd take a whirl at it just for the excitement." He gave a short, mirthless laugh and grimly added, "There's liable to be some, all right!"

For all that, Van's arrival in the place attracted no notice at all. As he rode the sweaty sorrel down the straggling street, he made mental note of the horses tied to the hitch rails in front of the saloon, cast a glance in through the open door and went on to the corral kept by little Snub Epperson, a kind but deadly soul, usually half crippled with rheumatism, but always able to give an account of himself in a fight. Van and Snub had stood together in more than one argument with rambunctious fellows from down in the Wall, and now Van hoped the corral had not changed hands in the two years and more that he had been away.

The corral had not. As Van dismounted in the dusty wings, Snub came limping out of the little shack behind the fence and opened the narrow gate that gave access to the wings.

"'Lo, Van. Where the hell you been, all this while?" Snub came forward, limping with one stiff knee that gave him the appearance of having a wooden leg. He thrust out a hand as hard as old leather and grinned. "Come up to pull in the slack, hunh?"

"Something like that, Snub. How's your good gun hand, these days?"

"Wel-l, it ain't paralyzed none to speak of yet," Snub drawled. "Rheumatiz has sure played hell with m' legs last winter or two, though. Just got back from Denver last month. Been doctorin' all winter. Them doctors down there pernounced me cured. They do that, quick as you git your hand to the bottom of your pocket. Boy, they sure do know when it's your last dime comin' up! So I'm cured, accordin' to them — but I ain't entered no foot race, so fur. If you got a scrap on the slate, don't make it no runnin' fight, Van, er I'll have to set out."

"I got corns, myself," Van hinted, pulling the saddle and blanket off Spider and running a soothing palm over the sweaty hide that was yet free of lump or chafed spots. "Who all's in town? Got the corral full, I see."

"Yeah. Bunch of horses from down toward Rawlins. LM brand — Baker's the man that owns 'em; Ches, they call 'im."

Van Patten whirled and peered sharply at Snub in the starlight.

"Did Ches Baker drive that LM herd in here?"

"That's what." Warned by something in Van

Patten's tone, Snub instinctively lowered his voice. "What's wrong, Van? Wet brand?"

"Not yet, but it will be if they ever get that herd into the Wall."

"Kinda bold, ain't they, Van? Takin' stole horses so fur without even changin' the brand looks kinda crazy to me. Sure you got the right line on 'em?"

With bitter brevity Van Patten told him the truth, to the tune of shocked oaths from Snub as the story came out. For Snub was an old bachelor; one of those bashful, chivalrous souls to whom a good woman is little lower than the angels.

"Stole his wife's horses and left her afoot ten mile from the closest neighbor! Now, what's the idea uh God lettin' a skunk like that go on livin'?" he inquired, with a plaintive kind of malevolence in his voice. "Give me the lightnin' at my command, and that feller would be crisp as a burnt bacon rind before the first clap uh thunder quit rollin'. Tell yuh, Van, the Great Foreman does some funny things, sometimes. Still, at the same time, you come along right the next day after the little woman was set afoot, and here yuh are talkin' to Snub Epperson, and them horses of

hern are right inside that fence, eatin' good hay an' drinkin' good water.

"No, come to think of it, looks like God figured lightnin' was too quick an' easy. Now, you lead your horse over here to the stable where I keep mine. Lord, what a chest he's got on 'im! Give him a few hours with his nose in a manger of hay, an' he'll hold up his end with the best of 'em. But that's like yuh, Van. You'd have the best horse in Wyoming or you wouldn't have none ——"

"Why stop at Wyoming? You can spread out all four ways and still it would be the truth. Snub, say, is Jockey Barrows in town, I wonder."

"Yeh, he's here — or he was this afternoon. What yuh want of him?" Snub limped forward and threw open the stable door, then stood back while Van led the sorrel inside.

"Straight ahead is a good clean stall; lots uh beddin' an' the manger full. Just pull saddle an' bridle and turn him loose, Van. Nothin' he can hurt." He waited until Van came out again, and then returned to his question.

"'Course, we kin start in an' kill off them three polecats, if yuh say the word. Er we kin ease the herd outa town, 'long t'ward mornin', and I kin

hold them three here while you fog along back with the horses to the little woman. She's afoot, yuh said. What if the kid took sick in the night, er somethin' like that? How's she goin' to git a doctor, hey?" Limping to the door of his shack, Snub turned upon his companion.

"She couldn't." Van stumbled over the roughened doorsill. "But if there's a God, she won't need to."

Snub had no reply for that, but touched a lighted match to the charred wick of the lamp and replaced the grimy chimney.

"It's a good guess them three is lappin' up whisky right now," he observed. "That man Baker told me to feed the bunch in the morning — tried to jew me down on the price, too. It's a cinch they ain't lookin' fer anybody on their trail, so you got the night b'fore yuh. You throw some good grub into yuh, an' then yuh better bed down in my bunk till I call yuh. One o'clock's plenty early t' start action.

"Whilst you and the sorrel's gittin' some rest, I'll go keep cases on them hyenies. Mebby I kin git holt of Jockey for yuh. If I can, I'll have 'im down here right after midnight. 'Course, this is

yore business, Van, but if I was you, I'd make damn' shore uh the little woman's horses, first thing I done. Then if the play comes so'st you kin give them three their needin's — why, all right. I s'pose," he added uneasily, "you'll have t' steal that herd, out an' out. Bein' her husband, Baker's got a legal right ——"

"You're dead wrong, Snub. Lea's father gave her them horses before she was married. If Ches had any legal hold on them, would he sneak home and drive them off in the night? He wanted her to sell them, she told me. Don't ever think he's too polite to hurt her feelings. He'd have sold them himself if he thought he could get away with it. But her dad would take a hand if he tackled anything like that, so Ches had to steal them. And that's why the dogs never barked that night," he added, half to himself. "I might have known it was Ches."

"Hunh?"

"Oh, nothing. That coffee sure smells good."

"It oughta. Been settin' on the stove sence noon. Kinda like a cup of coffee when I come in with my leg achin' like it would drop off. Finish 'er up, Van, an' I'll start me a fresh batch."

While Van ate as only a hungry man can eat who has subsisted for a couple of weeks upon scanty fare, Snub Epperson talked on and on, garrulously, yet with a kindly purpose behind the inconsequential flow of words. For Van Patten's sunken eyes and the deep lines beside his mouth betrayed the tensity of his nerves and the dangerous quality of his temper.

Snub had seen that look before now and he knew what it might portend. He was shrewd enough to know that more than the chivalrous desire to recover a herd of horses stolen from a woman had gone to the making of that mood. The look in Van's eyes when he spoke the name of Ches Baker told of a personal enmity that went too deep for easy speech. And while Snub would readily admit that any man who robbed a woman needed killing, his sober judgment could not agree that killing the thieves offhand would be a sensible performance, as matters now stood.

"Git the horses outa town and on the trail home," he mused aloud. "That's the ticket — git the horses first, and then mebby the chance 'll come ——"

"Better leave the key to the gate with me,"

Van said, glancing up as Snub painfully eased himself off the bench and started for the door. "I'd hate to spoil a good padlock for you, and I may take a notion to drift before you get back."

"No, you wait fer me, Van. I'll be back, and I'll have Jockey Barrows and a couple more boys if I kin find 'em. Don't you git in too big a rush — you wait."

"Well, I want that key left here. You might drop dead or something."

Snub grunted but he reached up to a nail beside the door and gave Van the key to the big padlock that held the lock of log chain which fastened the stout, plank gate and safeguarded any horses left in his care. Then he put on his hat and went limping off up the road, wholeheartedly committed to the cause of the grave-eyed woman and the child who lisped, "God bless Van Patten and keep him safe from harm."

CHAPTER SEVEN

VENGEANCE OF THE HERD

LEFT to himself, Van went to the stable, fumbled at his saddle and then headed straight for the corral, unlocked the gate and let himself in. The tired herd, munching hay at the long, pole mangers while the colts nuzzled hungrily beside their mothers, lifted heads and looked inquiringly at the intruder, their eyes shining in the starlight. A fine lot of horses, Van mentally judged them in the half light.

As he approached, the nearest horses moved restlessly and edged away from him, but there was none of the nervous scurrying common to loose horses when a stranger appears suddenly among them, and Van's eyes brightened with a trainer's appreciation of Lea's method of gentling them. With swift glances toward such horses as came nearest he crossed the corral and stood for a minute while they wove in and out, disturbed but not particularly alarmed.

Beautiful animals they were, every one save the

tall, sway-backed old gray which Marylee naively called her " wittle pony." William was not little. His ewe neck stretched high above the herd and his gabled hips were comically prominent among the rounded rumps of the other horses. At least twenty years old, Van swiftly estimated him; a beloved caricature of what once had been a good range horse.

He spoke softly to them, talking in that caressing monotone which horses love and to which they respond instinctively. One big brown mare stepped timidly forward, stood and extended her neck to its fullest length, snuffing investigatingly. Van put out his hand — he had not forgotten that they loved sugar, and had purloined all the lumps in Snub's big tin can. The brown mare reached and reached, put out a quivering lip and was finally constrained to take a step before she could touch the lump. As she nuzzled his open palm with eager little brushings of her lips, Van patted her jaw, straightened her heavy forelock, handled her ears. A gentle thing she was, her round-hipped sorrel colt beside her.

Another horse ventured near, and another. Under his breath Van whistled the call that

Grace Balloch Memorial Library

8691

twisted his heart strings with bittersweet memories. A quiver ran along Van's nerves as a brown head tossed upward, faced toward him and showed a perfect interrogation point in pure white between the eyes. It was Query, Lea's own saddle horse which she had broken to ride.

He whistled the call again and Query pushed forward, parting the horses to right and left as a power boat pushes aside the bow waves. A beautiful animal! Lea's judgment of horses was as keen as his own, Van told himself, as the splendid gelding came up.

A sniff at the little pile of sugar in Van's extended palm, and Query was making friends, yielding unfaltering faith to this stranger who had given the secret password to his confidence.

This man was unknown to him, but he was a man to trust on a lonely trail, a man to love and to obey. You can't fool an intelligent horse any more than you can fool a dog.

Now the horses all began crowding up, word having gone mysteriously among the horses that here was one who brought love symbolized by the sugar in his hand. The colts, not having acquired a sweet tooth, peevishly protested against

the interruption to their supper while their mothers pushed and crowded and edged in like human mothers around a bargain table.

Van fed all that got near enough, but his interest was centered on Query.

"Hunh?" he murmured whimsically as he ran caressing fingers over the peculiar mark in the horse's forehead.

"Hnh-hnh-hnh!" Query made quizzical reply, and Van chuckled.

"*She* taught you to do that, I'd bet money on it. Didn't she, old boy?"

It may have been accident, it may have been the rising inflection in Van's voice that impelled Query to nod his head as he repeated the wordless sound which meant pleasurable anticipation, assent, satisfaction. Or it may have been a request for more sugar.

Van gave him another lump and talked to him as only a lover of horses will do, crooning under his breath the words of endearment he never would utter aloud and in broad daylight.

Lea's horse. He laid his tanned cheek against Query's satiny jaw as the horse stood touching Van's shoulder with little fondlings of his upper

lip — kissing, Lea called it. So poignantly did Van remember that when he finally lifted his head, his cheeks were wet.

He drew his fingers across his eyes with an impatient gesture and started for the gate, but Query followed him with that doglike affection which a good horse bestows upon the master he loves. All the older mares and most of the younger horses swung in behind, moved by one accord to cling to this man who understood. Lonely, they seemed to be, tired of the long drive and wanting to be back home again, on the knoll under the oaks beside the lazy little stream where Marylee sometimes waded in the sunny shallows after "wogglers." Even the tall and bony William awoke from his lethargic dozing and moved stiffly in the wake of the walking herd.

"Aw, hell!" Van exclaimed, in pretended disgust. "Go on back and finish your hay. Can't a feller give you a pat on the nose without you wanting to walk all over him? Go on!" He flung out his arms and the nearest horses dodged and then came tagging along, like pups that refuse to be sent home when there is the prospect of a delightful excursion afoot.

Van laughed, and the diversion turned him away from his own loneliness and brought him back to realities and to the practical advantage in having these horses look upon him as a friend. Since they refused to leave him, and since they really needed to eat their fill to-night, he turned and walked back to the mangers and stood there while the horses trooped after him and began nosing eye-deep in the hay.

No wonder Lea cried herself into a headache when she lost this herd that must have come to fill the place of the human companionship which she lacked in that isolated little valley, he was thinking, when close beside him Query threw up his head and stared in the direction of the gate.

Van looked, but he could see nothing save the dim outline of the posts and planks and a vague blur which was Snub Epperson's stable. Query dipped his nose to the manger again, snatched a mouthful of hay and half turned, crowding Van a little in his eager curiosity over something half revealed to his alert attention. Other horses lifted their heads and looked, suspending mastication of the hay in their mouths while they stood and listened.

Any horseman will heed a warning of that kind. When Query betrayed certain signs of uneasiness and an incipient alarm, Van took it for granted that out beyond the corral lurked some hidden menace. Involuntarily he felt along his gun belt, made sure that his gun would not catch in the holster and waited, his pulse quickening in sympathy with the nervous tremor that ran like an electric current through the herd.

A mumble of sounds became faintly discernible to his ears as voices approached the wings. Snub and Jockey Barrows, probably. Perhaps others whom Snub had managed to press into the venture for the sport of it or for the friendship they felt for Van. They were talking with voices lowered, which was natural enough, and they were coming down the wings to the gate. Van thought that Snub had found him gone from the cabin and was making a shrewd guess at his whereabouts.

The brown horse beside him lifted a forefoot and set it down again, giving his head a little shake. To quiet him Van threw his left arm up over the horse's neck, and Query relaxed under the quiet reassurance of the touch. Then words

began to form on the surface of the voices, and Van stood motionless as a post, listening and waiting.

"Show him to you — best horse in the State — can turn a cow — dirt cheap at a hundred and fifty."

"Have to be the best horse in the State if I bought him at that price — and I don't know as I want him to turn no cows."

"Well, you're heeled for anything that can come up, if you've got Query between your knees. He can run circles around any horse in the country. Steady as a rock to shoot off from, but he can jump out from under the saddle at the word go. Raised him from a colt — broke him myself."

Beside the manger, Van Patten froze to a calm as deadly as a cobra's tense moment of coiled watchfulness. Ches Baker, claiming the credit due to Lea! Boasting as usual, with lies that should have seared his lips for very shame.

"Wonder you'd want to sell him, if he's so good," the other voice observed with a very natural skepticism.

"Wouldn't, if I didn't have more of the same," Ches replied. "Now, what does that limping

idiot mean by leaving the gate unlocked? The whole bunch might have been run off right under my nose! "

"Ain't got much confidence in the morals of this burg, have yuh? "

" Wouldn't trust any man to keep his rope on the saddle when he sights this bunch of horses," Ches retorted. " Pippins, every one of them. Except one old skate," he bethought him. " He runs with the herd and takes the place of a bell mare, but as a horse he don't count."

They were in the corral now, walking toward the huddled little herd, peering to distinguish one horse from another.

" Moon 'll be up, later on," Ches continued. " But I don't want the horses disturbed once they get settled down for the night; expect to be on the trail with 'em at daylight. They're in good condition, even the colts. But it pays — horses like these aren't picked up every day. Look at that mare and colt. Perfect lines, eh? Raised every one myself. They're gentle as dogs. Every one is halter broke and leads perfectly. You can put your rope on any horse here and start off at a lope, and you'll never feel a pound of drag.

That's the way I break every colt on the ranch."

"Makes 'em worth more, all right," the other conceded.

Query had turned his head aside and was nosing Van's shoulder as a timid child reaches out to touch its mother's dress when strangers approach. The other horses were milling a little, edging away from the two yet inclined to stick as close as possible to their new pal. Through Van's cold fury shot a contemptuous thought that the herd itself was calling Ches a liar to his face by showing its distrust of him who prated so glibly of his intimate friendship with each horse there.

"Now that horse I was telling you about ——"

Ches was so close that Query could have reached out and touched him with his nose if he had wanted to do so. But Query never wiggled an ear, and Ches failed to recognize him with his face hidden.

"This horse has a peculiar mark, like a question mark in his forehead. It's so striking that I named him after it. I call him Query — ha-ha!"

That arrogant, vain cackle was still rasping the air when Van's right foot shot up and out with a

terrific impact that propelled Ches Baker a long ten feet away, where he sprawled on all fours and then got up groggily, not quite certain of what had happened.

It was then that a gentle old mare close by suddenly squealed and lifted heels to him with a malevolent kick that thudded sickeningly on flesh and bone. Ches went down like a felled ox and lay motionless.

While Van and Ches' companion stood staring aghast, there sounded another trumpeting squeal and Bay Omaha, the stallion, came in a whirlwind rush to the spot. The herd scattered to let him through. Mane tossing, nostrils blaring his challenge, he reared and lunged toward the man who seemed to him to be the cause of the sudden disturbance.

That man whirled and fled to the fence, beating the stallion by inches. As he squirreled up and over the top he gave a piercing shriek which told Van plainer than words that the stallion's teeth had nipped him.

Balked of that vengeance, Bay Omaha wheeled and came charging back, sending the herd pell-mell to the far side of the corral and out of the

way so that he might wreak terrible retribution on the enemy.

With a squeal he reared, his hoofs like lethal bludgeons poised ready for the battering blows. They came down with a smashing force, but in his rage he missed the body and instead drove Ches' big range hat into the loose dust of the corral.

When he came up again for another pile-driver blow, Van's loop hissed through the air and settled over the horse's head, sharply outlined against the stars. Van braced himself for the "dally" hold which a skilled roper uses when afoot, and the maddened brute came down, fighting the humiliation of the rope instead of venting his rage on the helpless thing at his feet.

That restraining loop around his neck spelled man's mastery. The stallion knew it, fought against it, yielded reluctantly as Van dragged him away from his victim and toward the fence.

Bay Omaha was not a vicious animal when no danger threatened the herd. Van counted on that, putting his trust in Lea's statement, "Even the stallion is gentle." That trust was not betrayed.

Bay Omaha did not turn upon his captor, as

might well have happened, but instead he reacted to his training. Perhaps he felt fairly well satisfied with having put one intruder to flight, and perhaps that half hour which Van had spent in the corral (never think he was not under Bay Omaha's watchful eye all the while!) bore fruit now in his obedience to this new master.

Van took a hitch over his nose, snubbed him to a post, and left him there snorting and stepping about in a half-circle, restive with the excitement but quite submissive again.

Men were coming down the wings, summoned perhaps by the man who had escaped over the fence. Van went down on one knee and turned Ches over, lighting a match to look into his face.

What he saw made him blow out the match and get up rather hastily. The wise old mare had avenged all the wrongs which the LM herd and their beloved mistress had ever suffered at the hands of Ches Baker, but the horseman in Van could not fail to be shocked at the manner of the requital.

"That you, Van?" Snub called guardedly as Van turned. "What's the matter? I seen a feller come away from the corral runnin' like hell

in a hailstorm. I got Jockey and Reese both here. What's happened? Somebody tryin' to git away with the bunch?"

"Not now," Van said queerly. "The bunch got away with him. Ches Baker got laid out by one of the mares. I may as well tell you that I kicked him first," he added. "I couldn't stomach some of the things he said to the fellow he had with him. He come up within reach and I lifted him with the toe of my boot. He sprawled on the ground, and one of the mares kicked him as he was getting up. By the mark, one hoof got him in the chest and the other in the face."

"Kill 'im?" Snub stared curiously down at the slack figure on the ground.

"Yes," Van said shortly, and turned as Query came up and thrust his nose over Van's shoulder. "I'm going to the house, Snub. You fellows can get along without me, I guess."

"Yeah, don't worry. You go get some sleep. This don't need to make no difference in yore startin' south at daybreak, Van."

"Well, turn the stallion loose when you're through, and tie the rope on my saddle, will you, Snub? I'm — all in."

" 'S he mean to handle? " Snub called after him.

" No," Van called back. " He ain't mean, he's — dead gentle." But he shivered when he said it, remembering what he had seen.

As he walked away, his shoulders slumped forward, Query tagged him to the very gate of the corral and nickered plaintively after him when Van slipped out and closed the barrier between them. But Van Patten was lost in his own gloomy thoughts and gave no heed. Query stood with his neck craned, trying to see over the gate that was too high for him, then lowered his head and watched Van pensively from between the bars as Van slowly disappeared up the wings, staggering a little as he went.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"GOOD WORK!"

MOONRISE was still an hour away when four horsemen rode quietly down to the mouth of the corral wings and halted there in a close group to talk furtively in voices just above a whisper.

"Blair, you 'tend to the gate," said one. "I'll ride in and ease the bunch out. And, Bill, you and Jonesy stay back here to receive 'em. Be damn' sure you don't make no noise, either. I'll crowd the horses over to this side as much as I can, and don't nobody haze 'em out of a walk. They're gentle and pretty well trail broke, and we ought to be able to get 'em out of town without any fuss at all."

"Aw, what you scared about?" growled Blair. "Ches is knocked cold and outa the game, and there's nobody else would try to stop us."

"Don't be so damn' sure he's out of the game," the first man retorted. "You run off and left him, didn't you say?"

"He ain't showed up anywhere, you'll notice."

"And when we come back to get him out of the corral, he was gone, wasn't he? No sign of him, and the horses quiet. He may be hurt, Blair, but that don't mean he's out of the game. You don't know Ches like I do."

"Oh, all right," Blair muttered. "We'll cat-foot it clear into Montana if yuh say so."

"You'll cat-foot it out of here, all right, or there'll be hell a-poppin'. The very fact that Ches is laying low looks darn suspicious to me. Come on, Blair. You two watch out the horses don't scatter. They won't, if you don't crowd 'em."

The two rode slowly down the wings and Blair dismounted to work over the padlock. It was old and a simple type that gave Blair much less difficulty than Snub would have thought possible, and presently the chain fell with a faint clinking sound and the gate swung open. Blair remounted and followed the other inside to turn the horses out into the wings as they came up.

At the far side of the corral a trampling was heard, and soon the horses came streaming through the gate, shying a little as they passed Blair, but giving no trouble whatever as they

went down the spreading wings to where the other horsemen waited.

But one horse moved reluctantly, as if he felt that something had gone wrong. His head was up and his eyes went seeking this way and that. Once or twice he would have dodged back into the corral, but the horsemen behind the herd inexorably drove him forward. Then suddenly, obeying one of those strange impulses which make a good horse seem almost humanly intelligent, Query threw up his head and sent a shrill, anxious whinny blaring into the night.

"Shut up, you damned hoodoo!" the leader muttered angrily under his breath, and urged the horses forward a little faster.

In the shack behind one of the wing fences, Van Patten landed in the middle of the floor, groggy with sleep that for an hour had blotted out thought. When he came to himself, he was holding his gun cocked in his hand, and he came near shooting Snub Epperson, who raised up in his bunk to see what was the matter.

"It's the LM horses," Van muttered, his voice strained and unnatural. "You shut the gate, didn't you, Snub?"

"Yes, and locked it. How'n the hell——" asked Stub.

"Some one got it open. You better call Jockey and Reese while I saddle up. May not need them, but still I might."

"Them horses ain't hurryin' none," Snub announced, after a minute of listening. "Van, you better wait till the boys git here. I'll bet it's that dang Lost Cabin gang, and you don't want to go up against that bunch alone."

For answer, Van pulled open the door and ran to the stable. Almost immediately, it seemed to Snub, swift drumming hoofbeats tore past the shack and he knew that Van Patten was out alone on the heels of the Lost Cabin gang, that band of professional horse thieves that harassed northwestern Wyoming.

From the direction they were taking Snub knew that they were heading for Hole-in-the-Wall. Once down in that maze of wooded canyons and hidden little basins, the LM horses were lost, so far as the lawful owner was concerned. They might be held in there for a year, but when they did emerge they would be driven up into Montana and sold in scattered groups, the brand so changed

that not even Lea Baker herself could swear they were hers.

It was common gossip of the range that the Lost Cabin gang never lost what they once got hold of. Every one knew it and every one accepted the belief that nothing could be done about it. Just as fleas on a dog are taken as a matter of course so were the depredations of the Lost Cabin gang. Honest stockmen charged off their percentage of loss through theft and were thankful for what profit remained.

Snub knew all that, and he took it for granted that Van knew it. If Ches Baker had not been affiliated with the gang, he was taking a considerable risk in bringing the LM herd to Lost Cabin. He had told Van that Ches must mean to throw in with them and avail himself of their smooth-working system of hiding the horses until they could be taken farther north.

Van believed that Ches had planned to deliver the herd to the Lost Cabin gang at a certain price, take the money and go back to Paradise. The man who had gone over the fence was no doubt one of the gang, and if the Lost Cabin gang had learned what had happened to Ches, it was almost

a foregone conclusion that they would take the herd anyway— and be better pleased to get it for nothing.

So Van rode hard on the heels of the herd, knowing too well how much depended on the next half hour. They were a cowardly bunch of thieves, so far as he knew anything about them. They would not risk their hides if they could help it, but terrorized honest range folk mostly by their whirlwind riding and the mystery with which they surrounded their depredations.

Query whinnied again some hundreds of yards away, and the sound was followed by the vibrant call of the stallion, who seemed to agree with the gelding that the herd was in bad hands and that help was needed as quick as it could get there. Again Query called, and Van heard the clatter of small stones and some one swearing a vicious string of oaths such as accompany all unusual incidents in the lives of a certain type of men.

Van spurred toward the sound until he glimpsed the vague blur of galloping horses. At one uneasy blot which he recognized as a man on horseback, he took a hasty shot and saw the rider go

tearing off around the herd, a loose horse close behind him.

It was all rather indistinct. A man without Van Patten's range training and perfect familiarity with the handling of horses under all conceivable conditions would not have known what was taking place out there in the dark; but without seeing the manœuver clearly, Van knew that a recalcitrant horse had been roped (by a lucky throw in the starlight) and was being led to prevent his breaking back and probably throwing the whole herd into confusion. He supposed it was the stallion that had been giving the rustlers trouble, or which they wanted to make sure of as the most valuable horse in the herd.

They had left the road and were thundering up a hillside, the horses running unevenly, certain mares worried about their colts and continually wheeling back to look for them. Van's spurs pricked Spider's flanks and the big horse lunged up the first steep slope to a gentler rise where the herd had swung aside, refusing to take the next acclivity. For the younger colts could not climb far at that pace, which had become terrific for them.

Again Van fired at certain heads and shoulders swaying above the herd. The ascent which the LM horses balked at, Spider took with the long leaps of a mountain lion. So presently he was overtaking them at a higher level. So also he was coming into closer range with the rustlers, and with the lightening of the east as the moon neared the mountain tops, they offered better targets.

While he galloped he emptied his gun with careful firing. He thought he made a hit with the next to the last shot, but he was not sure, for the fellow stayed in the saddle, lurching like a drunken man who has lost all sense of equilibrium and rides without rhythm like a sack of meal. But some of the riders sent bullets back to meet him, and one slugged into the fleshy part of his thigh.

At the moment Van was reloading his gun. So intent was he upon driving off the thieves and recovering the horses that he was scarcely aware of the wound. Something hit him, he knew, but it might have been a rock for all the impression it made upon his mind.

Other horsemen came galloping wildly behind him, calling out to know where he was. Van's

answer was another stream of bullets — and since they were not directed back toward the rear but ahead toward the raiders, Jockey and Reese no doubt located him easily enough and knew that in them he recognized reinforcements.

Now he was almost abreast of the running herd and still shooting. In the rapidly growing light as the moon came up he saw one horseman fall and two others duck away down the hill. The fourth rider presently followed and the lead horses took an angle which would bring them into the road that wound along at the foot of the hill.

Above them on the slope Van shouted, turning the leaders still more until, as they hit the road, they were galloping in the opposite direction. The main herd gradually swung into line behind them and the immediate danger was past.

"Good work!" Jockey Barrows called cheerfully to Van, as he came half sliding down the hill by a short cut and joined him. "That's one time they didn't get away with it, anyhow! I think you got one of the bunch, Van."

CHAPTER NINE

THE LM HERD GOES SOUTH

REESE came up chortling over the victory, and rode alongside while the LM horses streamed down the road that led south, going at a trot as the driving speed and the shooting ceased. It had been hot work while it lasted and they were quite willing to take an easier pace.

"Looks like somebody found out about Baker, after all, and thought this was a fine chance to git away with the bunch," said Reese. "What yuh goin' to do now, Van? Run 'em back in the corral and wait for daylight, or start 'em on down the trail?"

"This is a fine time to travel," Van said laconically, pulling Spider to a walk while he ejected the empty shells from his gun and replaced them with loaded ones.

"Well, I reckon you're right," Jockey said, after a minute. "I don't know why there was only four of the gang out after that bunch, but it kinda

looks to me like this party was got up impromptu and informal, as they say. Kind of a side dish cooked up quick, when they found Baker was out of it. But that ain't saying the rest of the bunch won't declare in, quick as they git wise to the fact that a lot of darn good horses is left orphant right here in Lost Cabin. I reckon you're wise to git 'em as far away as yuh can and as quick as yuh can."

"Me and Jockey can go with yuh for an hour or two," Reese offered. "Wisht we could make the hull drive, but we can't, Van. We promised to start for Thermopolis right after sun-up. We'll go as far as we dast, and on the way back we'll know whether you're bein' trailed by the gang. If yuh are, we'll shoo 'em back where they belong."

"Thanks. That'll beat going all the way," Van told him. "Once the horses are lined out and get settled down to the trail, they'll go without driving. They'll be headed for home, you want to remember. Don't think they won't know it!"

"That's right, too."

"They were raised down there on the ranch they were stole from. Most of them, anyway.

Turn 'em loose and they'd take a bee line for home. Well, I'll be damned! "

The exclamation was jarred out of him when old William came loping stiffly up from the direction of the corral, head high and whinnying at every step. They let him pass and he joined the herd just ahead of them with a thankful groan and relapsed into his accustomed plodding gait that had a queer hitch in it caused by a touch of stringhalt.

" What's that old crowbait doin' here? " Jockey demanded. " He never made the trip up, did he? "

" Sure did. What's more, he's got to make it back, if I have to pack him myself. He's an old heirloom in the family and the kid swears by him. Calls him her ' wittle pony ' and thinks he's the grandest thing on the ranch."

" Oh. Sure, he'll have to go, if a kid wants him," Jockey said in an oddly tender tone. " Kids take funny notions. Got one myself, Van, since you was up here."

That remark opened the trail of reminiscence, but Van Patten betrayed a singular indifference to the absorbing topic of who-married-whom in the past two years. For one thing, he was aware of a

warm trickle down his leg, and it had begun to dawn upon him that he would have a bullet wound to contend with on the way back. The wound was beginning to burn throbbingly and he knew it ought to be attended to, but if he let the boys know he had been shot they would insist that he go back to Lost Cabin, which was out of the question, so far as he was concerned.

The LM horses must go back to Lea. Somehow, he must tell her what had happened in that corral, though he could scarcely bring himself to think of it yet, much less talk of it calmly, as he would have to do. For however much he might hate Ches Baker, however ready he might be to shoot him at sight, it had been a horrible thing to see him kicked to death in a dark corral. And the memory of Bay Omaha lunging — no, he did not see just how he was going to tell Lea about it; though, of course, he must do it somehow.

"Well," Jockey Barrows observed at last, as they topped a hill and could look away across a prairie lying quiet under the moon with a dark strip of timber eight or ten miles away, "I reckon me and Reese will have to leave yuh, Van. The bunch sure knows it's headed home, all right.

Look at that old gray horse. If he just had stringhalt in them other legs of hisn, he'd fly! "

"Yeah, we better be foggin' back," Reese reluctantly agreed. "Anything we can do for yuh, Van — besides killin' off anybody we ketch follerin' yuh? "

"Not a thing that I know of," Van declared, secretly anxious for them to be gone. "I'm sure obliged to you, boys. It was your coming up that put them fellers on the run. Guess they didn't know how many was on their trail. I'll see you again before long, maybe. Tell Snub I sure appreciate what he done."

"Well, we've got to drift, or we won't be back in time. So long, Van, and good luck."

"*Adios,*" Van replied, gritting his teeth because of his wound.

They turned and galloped away, and Van rode on after the briskly stepping herd. In that line of woods far ahead was a little clear stream, and he promised himself he would stop there for a while. The boys would make sure that none of the Lost Cabin gang was on his trail, and the horses would be safe enough.

So he rode on, letting the horses make their own

pace in spite of the grinding ache in his leg. The moon stood high overhead when dawn came creeping over the prairie land. It paled before the blushing clouds, then faded out altogether as the sun came up red-faced and round.

Van's tired eyes stared out gloatingly over the LM herd. For the first time he could observe them in full daylight, and the sight of them stirred him deeper than he would have dared confess. They were beauties, just as he had known all along.

At the head of the herd walked Bay Omaha, sentient ears twitching forward, watching the way ahead, then back, as he glanced now and then at his big family. Last of all shambled old William, gamely keeping up with the laggard colts, his afflicted hind leg jerking up more than ever with every step he took. In between trooped the mares and colts, the lean-flanked, deep-chested geldings, the round-bodied fillies with slim pasterns and pretty arched necks.

Van glanced here and there over the dusty backs and tossing heads, looking for a certain horse that had called him friend. Among the herd there were few that had not, at one time or

another, turned their heads and glanced back at him with plain brown faces, with starred foreheads, with narrow stripes down the nose — but never a face with a white question mark between the eyes. Where was Query? Why didn't he turn around and say hello?

A sudden fear smote him, making his throat contract painfully. He took a long breath and whistled the call he had long ago taught Lea Moore. Ears flipped backward and forward and several horses turned to look — but none of them was Query.

And then like the thrust of a keen blade came the memory of that shrill, anxious whinny, and of the confused, trampling hoofbeats and of a man swearing over some task made difficult by the darkness. He had guessed then that a horse had been roped to keep it from breaking out of the herd. Now he knew that his guess was right, and that the horse was Query.

CHAPTER TEN

BLAZING STAR LEARNS THE FEEL OF A SADDLE

Van pulled Spider to a stand and looked back over the way he had come. Lea's saddle horse back there in the possession of the outlaws? It was unthinkable. The thing simply couldn't be, he told himself desperately, and turned back to the herd to scan each one sharply. He took the risk of getting the horses confused and excited by sending Spider down alongside the herd so that he could have a front view of the animals. For the time being he forgot that he was wounded, so intent was he upon proving that his fear was foolish and that Query was somewhere among them.

Again and yet again he whistled the call. But although the whole herd seemed to recognize the signal and stared at him inquiringly, there was no face marked like Query. He could not be mistaken, for in the vague light of the stars he had singled the horse out the moment his head lifted at the signal. If he had known him in the dark

he surely would know him in daylight. Query simply was not in the LM herd.

Once more he stared at the trail behind him, meditating the madness of going back. But there were the other horses, Lea's sole means of support, so far as he knew. He couldn't turn them loose and let them shift for themselves; not in this country infested with thieves who would be overjoyed to find a herd such as this running loose without a soul to watch over them. Furthermore, he was in no condition to face the Lost Cabin gang alone, even if he found them with Query. He could not expect to have the help of Reese and Jockey, for no doubt they were already on their way to Thermopolis.

As for Query, he was probably far along the trail to Hole-in-the-Wall. The fellow who had him would not risk losing an animal like that. Any fool would see at a glance that he was far above the average saddle horse and would value him accordingly.

No, he could not go back. He must consider the greater good, must guard the greater number. There were others in that herd which would make splendid saddle horses.

His somber glance went appraisingly here and there, judging this horse and that as possible mounts for Lea. A dozen or so more had all the qualities that go to make splendid riding animals, but then his chin sank on his chest in a dejection that went too deep for cursing. However good they might be, they were not Query.

The sag of failure in the set of his shoulders, he rode forward with the sun shining warm on his back and the chill shadow of defeat in his heart. There was no solace in the fact that the LM herd walked steadily southward, unharmed and on their way home instead of being harried along the rustler's trail where so many good horses had been as irretrievably lost to their owners as if they had been shot. Not even the intrepid if hitching progress of old William could lighten the gloom in Van's eyes. He told himself that he would cheerfully have taken another bullet if by doing so he could have saved Query.

Well, since he must go on, he would do it as efficiently as possible and as quickly as was consistent with good horsemanship. His leg ached frightfully but he rather welcomed the pain as a slight assurance that he had not shirked any part

of his duty. At least he had done the best a bone-headed, empty-skulled roughneck could do, he kept saying contemptuously, as if self-inflicted insults might somehow ease the humiliation of his loss.

It seemed a long way to the woods beside the stream, but the stallion kept his herd pointed straight for the crossing, and the pace he set kept the younger colts drilling right along to keep up. In spite of himself, Van's eyes lightened with admiration at the splendid generalship of Bay Omaha, who kept the herd together with the firm, unspoken discipline of an officer at the head of his regiment.

With Bay Omaha leading them the LM horses gave such unquestioning obedience that Van's work was lightened to the point where he felt himself almost superfluous on the drive. It was only his human guardianship that Bay Omaha needed, for on the march the bay stallion asked no odds of any man, especially when the march led toward home.

Unlike most of the rivers in Wyoming, this little stream lay almost level with the surrounding country, in a shallow depression thinly dotted

with trees. The horses trooped down the gentle slope, nipping bunches of grass as they went, and waded into the burbling stream, splashing water as they crossed to the other side where the grass, of course, seemed greener than where they were.

Van waited until they had drunk their fill and were feeding quietly with Bay Omaha on guard against surprises, and then he sought a shady spot farther up the stream, dismounted awkwardly and limped to a convenient rock close beside the water where he could give his wounded leg what simple treatment was possible there in the wilderness.

The bleeding had stopped, and it was with some relief that he discovered a somewhat shallow wound, after all. The bullet had struck the outer side of his thigh, bored close to the surface and lodged just under the skin. A blue lump told plainly enough where it lay embedded in the tissues.

It was that lump of lead, Van decided, that hurt him so cruelly and would do the most harm. He started a small fire, sterilized the sharpest blade of his jack-knife by the simple method of heating it in the flame, and when it was cool enough he set his teeth and sliced through the quarter-inch of

flesh and skin, squeezed the wound firmly and out popped the bullet, followed by a gush of blood.

Fortune favored Van Patten. His crude surgery, though it no doubt would have shocked a surgeon, did not slash through an artery as might so easily have happened, and he was able to staunch the bleeding and to relieve much of the inflammation by bathing the wound with cold water. That done, he ruthlessly sacrificed his shirt for a bandage; gave it a cold water washing and bound his leg with the strips tied together.

Snub had tied a compact bundle of food behind the cantle; a kindly deed performed some time in the night while Van was lying down. Snub was a wise old rangeman, and he knew that when Van mounted and rode away from that corral he would probably be in a hurry and his destination was likely to prove uncertain. A horse can eat grass wherever he stops to rest — in Wyoming in the springtime; a man must have food, and unless he carries it with him he is likely to go hungry for a while.

So Van Patten had breakfast, that morning, and felt the better for it. But nothing could lift his spirits to a cheerful mood. Like recurrent

spells of nausea the memory of that dim vision in the corral swept over him to be met by an involuntary shudder. And in spite of all reason his seeking glance went here and there among the horses, looking for a certain tall, proud-stepping brown gelding with a white question mark between his big, soft eyes.

More than once he caught himself on the verge of whistling the signal, and stopped with a shamed resentment for the weakness. A horse was a horse, he told himself gruffly. And Lea might well be thankful she had not lost the whole herd. There were other horses ——

A shiny brown four-year-old with a white star in his forehead came grazing near, and Van's eyes narrowed and fixed upon it speculatively. Lea must not be left afoot, that much was certain. Nor should she be compelled to break a horse unaided before she could ride in comfort. This brown, now, with the blazing white star ——

"Blazing Star!" He said it aloud, while the brown lifted its head and looked at him inquiringly. "You ain't Query, but only for the mark you could be his twin brother. You'll do, old boy. Come here and let's talk it over."

With some difficulty he got upon his feet. His coat pocket still held sugar, and with that he began patiently to coax the horse nearer until it was eating the sugar he held on his palm. Lea's method of taming her horses was surely effective, for without any trouble worth mentioning Van got a rope on the brown and persuaded him to accept the saddle as something which all good horses were expected to wear.

A man with a fresh bullet wound in his leg is not in the best form to start in breaking a horse to ride, but Van was never known to govern his own behavior by what others would naturally expect him to do. Lea would need a saddle horse on the ranch, and it happened to be Van's business to break horses to ride. That he chanced to be temporarily crippled in one leg was his own misfortune and in no way altered his plan.

Wherefore, Van rode out of that shallow gully on the horse he called Blazing Star, with Spider trailing behind at the end of a lead rope. Had the horse bucked a certain good rider would doubtless have taken a fall. But Blazing Star was headed toward home and would follow the herd in any case, and Van had a way of winning a

horse's confidence, and Blazing Star walked proudly with little prancing side steps now and then. For a while he was not quite sure that he liked the iron in his mouth, but when he learned the trick of rolling the little wheel in the bit, Van roused from his abstraction to grin at Blazing Star's evident enjoyment of the sound it made.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A LETTER ON THE CORRAL GATE

In the cool, dewy dusk of a certain evening when the frogs were croaking frenziedly all along the meandering stream and the mosquitoes made one vast humming sound in the meadows, Van Patten loped ahead of the herd and reined in Blazing Star at the gate of the upper pasture. He hoped that he could manage to open it without dismounting, but Blazing Star had never opened a gate in his life, or helped a man to do so; and the horses were all too eager to be home. So Van dismounted and hobbled to the task, waiting while every one of the LM horses crowded through, even to old William — every one, that is, save Query. Of him Van did not like to think.

It was torture to stand on that right leg while he lifted toe to the stirrup, but the brown horse had learned that he must never move about when some one grasped the saddle horn to mount. So the excruciating detail was accomplished as it al-

ways had been, through grim determination, and Blazing Star hurried to catch up with the other horses that had gone on at a trot.

Down the creek road they went, nipping and jostling one another in their eagerness to be home. There was another gate to open, and farther along another one. But Van Patten was growing almost accustomed to pain and he bore it stoically, knowing that he must.

As the horses trotted down the trail, so glad to be home that it seemed a shame they could not express their joy with shouting laughter, that familiar mood of depression seized Van Patten; a morbid misgiving that made him dread the end of the journey. What if Snub had been right? What if something had happened to Marylee in the week and more that he had been gone? Or to Lea herself? He had said that God would not permit such a thing, but now he was not so sure, and he dreaded to put his fears to the test of certainty. For the first time, Van Patten was afraid.

The two dogs were out chasing a rabbit and met the herd with joyful yelps. Lea would hear them barking — or would she? They were still

a mile or more from the house, and he decided that it was not likely she would hear them at all. Well, at any rate the dogs were all right, he tried to comfort himself, and straight away felt a surge of anger against the dead man for having left a woman and child away off here by themselves where a hundred different catastrophes might befall them.

In the lower end of the upper pasture was a corral, and he drove the docile herd inside and shut the gate while he roped out Spider and old William. For the rest of the way he would lead the two. It would simplify the home-coming of the herd, for he would turn the horses loose inside the lower pasture and let them go where they would.

The two dogs, having lost the rabbit in a rocky cairn against the hillside, loped down to the creek and drank. The frog chorus hushed and the plop-plop-plop of precipitate diving was heard along the shore. Presently the dogs trotted up with red tongues dripping and took their places behind the led horses quite as if they meant to have a share of the credit for bringing home the herd.

Their untroubled manner served to reassure Van Patten a trifle. Lea had said that they were good watch dogs. They surely would know if anything went wrong around the place — and yet they had permitted the horses to be stolen and had not raised the alarm. Van's fluctuating spirits slumped again.

The cabin was dark. He turned the three horses into the corral that still had hay from the last feeding, more than a week ago. No one had been at the ranch, then. He hesitated beside the gate before he moved slowly up the path, limping a good deal on the wounded leg. It was not late. Why was the cabin dark so early in the evening? A tree grew beside the path, near the corner of the sagging porch, and he stopped there and stood trying to muster courage for the next few feet. It was all so silent!

But then the clear, childish treble of Marylee floated out to him through the open window, and Van was so relieved that he turned faint, just for a minute, and sank down on the plank seat nailed to the tree. So, without meaning to turn eavesdropper, Van Patten listened.

"I wish," said Marylee, "you'd wight 'e wamp.

I don't s'pect God will know who it is sayin' vis prayer, if He can't see me."

"God can see in the dark, honey-girl. I can't light the lamp. There isn't much oil left, and if Van Patten should come in after dark with the horses, we'd want a light so we could give him some supper."

"You tell God to wisten to me, will you? I want to pray hard for God-bless-Van Patten. I want him to bring me back my wittle pony."

"God will, I'm sure of it, dear."

"An' I want God to give Query back to you. I'll tell Him to bring back Query anyway, if He can't bring bofe of vem, but — but I *do* want my wittle pony."

"Van Patten will bring them both back, Marylee. I'm just as sure of it as anything in this world." Lea's voice sounded wistful, Van thought; not as if she was absolutely sure, but as if her hope was trying its best to be faith.

"Sure as you're settin' in vat wocking chair?" asked Marylee.

"Absolutely sure. Now be a good girl and don't talk so much. Say your prayers and mother'll tuck you in bed."

So Marylee prayed with perfect faith, and in this wise:

"Now I way me down to sweep,
I pray ve Word my soul to-o keep.
If I should die before I wake,

I pray ve Word to take awful good care of my wittle pony — an' Query an' all ve ovver horses an' kill vat mean ole bull vat was goin' to hook me, and bless papa an' mamma an' ever'body and if you dest send Van Patten back wif all the horses an' my wittle pony and Query, you needn't bovver about killin' the mean ole bull or anyfing else. 'Cause my mamma needs Query to go to town an' I need my wittle pony to go wif my mamma. An' vis I ask for Jesus-sake-amen."

In the darkness outside Van Patten set his teeth hard together as he limped stealthily away to the bunk house and lay down on the bed that stood nearest the door. The black sense of failure rode him harder than ever it had done. He would sooner face a firing squad than that clear-voiced child in the cabin with her pitiless faith and her big, questioning eyes. With all his foreboding he had not dreamed just how impossible

it would be to come back here without Query, and to be the one who must tell the truth about the man whom Marylee had just prayed God to bless.

For a long, long while he lay there, until the droning of the mosquitoes outside the screened window somehow blended with the throbbing of his leg and the two drifted farther away until he was barely conscious of them. Van Patten slept a while and forgot his mental burdens and the ache of his weary body.

He could not have slept so very long, however, for the mantel clock in Lea's little living room had just chimed midnight when Lea thought she heard the neighing of a horse. She sat up in bed and listened, her pulses beating in her temples. Perhaps she had dreamed it. Perhaps it had been the echo of that last stroke of the clock bell, of which she had been dimly aware in her slumber.

She slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb Marylee whose warm little body lay cuddled close to her own, and with a kimono pulled hastily over her shoulders she went to the door and stood just within the latched screen; listening with every strained nerve that had waited so long for that sound.

Did she hear a faint clupet-clupet-clupet of galloping hoofs? She thought so, for a minute or two. But then the blood was beating so loudly in her ears that she thought it must have been that. And the frogs made such an infernal noise she could not have heard anything else if there had been ever so much whinnying and galloping.

She was tempted to dress and go down to the corral, but the mosquitoes humming outside the screen made her dread the trip. Besides, if Van Patten had returned with the horses, he would come on to the house; or at least he would strike a light in the bunk house, if it was only a match to light a cigarette. Lea knew the habits of men when they have come in off a long drive.

She pulled a rocking chair to the doorway and sat for a long time with her kimono huddled around her, watching that bunk house. She had patience — the last six years had taught her that.

But when the mantel clock tinkled the half hour, and no light showed; tick-tocked indefatigably to the point where it gave a warning whirr and then chimed *one;* when another half hour was marked off the long night, and no sound rose above the persistent *kerrr-ek-rr-rek, kerrr-rek-err-*

rek of the frogs, Lea sighed and told herself she had been dreaming, and went back to bed.

As so often happens in life, she had not awakened quite soon enough. There must have been a light in the bunk house before twelve, for when Lea went down to milk her cows, there were old William and a brown horse in the corral. When she went running to the gate with the milk pails jangling together, she found this note twisted into the hasp where she could not possibly miss it:

LEA:

The horses are in the pasture. I got in late and didn't want to bother you. Query got away and I am going back after him. I know about where he is and will get him all right. On the way home I gentled this horse so you can ride him till I get back with Query. I named him Blazing Star and he knows his name already, so I hope you like it.

Yours truly,
VAN PATTEN.

P. S. Lea, don't feel bad, but Ches is dead. He got kicked by one of your horses. I don't know which one; he never knew what hit him. Don't feel bad about it; he is the one that stole your horses.

VAN

CHAPTER TWELVE

VAN PATTEN TAKES THE TRAIL AGAIN

"If you're always goin' around lookin' fer trouble," Snub Epperson declared, "you shore will meet up with a plenty. That's what I always say, an' she comes out right on the dot every time. An' if you don't git blood-poisonin' an' have that there laig cut off up to yer neck er thereabouts, it'll shore be funny."

"Yeah, let's have a hearty laugh," growled Van Patten. "You're only rehashing what Emerson said, and he didn't mean it that way."

"I ain't either," Snub testily denied. "I don't know Emerson; never seen 'im, er even heard of 'im. What's more, I don't borry nobody's idees about things. I don't need nobody to tell me that when a man goes foggin' around over the country with a bullet hole in his laig you could chase a cat through, he's lookin' fer trouble an' he'll find it."

"You got the thing mixed, Snub. Emerson said, 'Harm watch, harm catch.' And what he meant was that if a fellow's always expecting the

worst — like blood poison, in this case — the chances are he'll bring it on by worrying his head off for fear he'll get it. My leg's all right. It's sore as the devil from having to ride day and night, but I ain't expecting blood poison, and I won't get it. If you'll hand me that carbolic salve and quit your infernal croaking, I'll come out all right."

"Y' will, hey? S'pose you'll go larrupin' off first thing to-morrow mornin'."

Van shook his head, his eyes turned down to watch his work of cleansing the bullet wound in his thigh. A week of hard riding had not helped the healing, he was forced to admit. In spite of his careful washing with cold water whenever he came to a clear-running stream, the wound remained angry and inflamed from the constant muscle movement, and he was glad the trip was over. But that is not what he said to Snub.

"I want a good fresh horse under me when I ride into the Wall, and Spider's about rode down to a whisper. I thought maybe I'd lay over here for a couple of days. Don't suppose anybody much 'll find out I'm here — unless you tell 'em."

"What'd I tell 'em for? Answer me that!"

Snub sat down and nursed his own leg, which ached with a grinding pain that seldom gave him any peace from rheumatism. "I got troubles of m' own. I don't have to go yawpin' all I know an' then some, jest to hear m' head roar. There's some store bandages up in that cubberd over your head, Van. Better use them. They been steerlized, er some such thing. In that box. Feller was goin' through an' left 'em fer me to use on m' knee. But they ain't no use in tyin' a rag around rheumatiz. She aches jest the same, no matter what yuh do.

"Say, Van," he added, changing the subject in his inconsequential manner that gave strangers a wholly erroneous idea that Snub Epperson was a garrulous old fellow, perfectly harmless and a bit childish, "what fer time did yuh have, gittin' them horses back to the widder? Purty glad to see 'em roll in, I bet! What'd she say?"

"Nothing." Van's lips closed more firmly than was their habit. "Not a darn thing, Snub. I just drove the herd into the pasture and shut the gate on 'em, and come on back."

"What yuh come back fer? That's what I'd like t' know. I sh'd think you'd 'a' stayed till

your laig got well, an' helped that woman out fer a while; anyway, till she could git somebody stiddy. If her saddle horse was stole outa the herd, like you said, don't that leave her afoot again? Wasn't a saddle mark on none uh them LM horses, that I seen."

"I gentled one to the saddle on the way down," Van explained shortly. "Rode him most of the way, and turned him in the corral where she could get him."

"Rode a bronk — *with that laig?*" Snub's jaw dropped. "You son-of-a-gun! If I'd 'a' knowed that ——"

"You'd have had my leg off right under my hat, I reckon."

Snub sat absently rubbing his stiffened and swollen knee while he stared curiously at Van Patten.

"Say, Van, there was a feller up here lookin' fer yuh, day er so after you started south with them horses. Didn't run acrost him an' git a bullet in yore laig that way, did yuh?"

"Nope." Van was opening the box of sterilized bandages with a feeling that here was real luxury, after having torn up his shirt for band-

ages on that nightmare trip. "Where was he from?" His fingers hovered idly over the blue paper while he eyed Snub.

"Paradise. He was a deputy and he claimed you broke jail down there after you'd shot up this same Ches Baker that got kicked to death. Shore you got that bullet whilst you was hazin' them horses away from the Lost Cabin gang?"

"Any reason why I shouldn't? They was bouncing bullets all around me for a few minutes. The wonder is I didn't collect a few more. And by the way, Snub, have you heard about anybody being crippled up, since that night? I'd 'a' swore I got one of the gang, maybe two. I know one feller rode darn funny after I'd smoked him. If it was this Lost Cabin bunch you'd oughta heard something about it."

Snub looked thoughtful.

"Well, I ain't seen Mike Moran fer a week, and he's got some money comin' to 'im from me. Mike was s'posed to come after it the day after you left. Might be him. I wouldn't put it past 'im to sneak a bunch uh horses outa my c'rell if he got the chance. Say, that deputy said Ches Baker owned quite a bit uh propity down in Para-

dise. He was s'posed to be in Denver, raisin' money to buy out the store right acrost the street from his saloon."

"Yeah, that's about what Ches would claim, all right. Did you tell him that Ches' way of raising money in Denver was to steal his wife's horses outa the pasture and run 'em up here and sell 'em to these horse thieves in Lost Cabin?"

"Yeah. I told 'im all about it, Van. I said 't Ches got what was comin' to him when one of his wife's horses caved his head in. He said he'd heard Ches and his wife was sep'rated an' she was runnin' the ranch alone. But that won't let you out none, if he ever gits in shootin' distance, Van. He's shore fighty about you — says you clouted 'im over the head with somethin' or other ——"

"King-pin off a road scraper," Van explained coolly. "A friend of mine passed it through the jail window."

"You son-of-a-gun!" Old Snub eyed him with a frank admiration. "He claims you knocked him cold an' then took time to eat the breakfast he'd brung yuh, b'fore you stole your horse outa the livery stable an' fogged it outa town. That right?"

"Well, I never do like to ride on an empty stomach," said Van.

"Couldn't uh shot Ches Baker up so awful bad," Snub reflected. "I seen 'im stripped, 'fore he was buried, here — doctor was lookin' fer other kick marks. There wasn't no bullet scar on 'im nowhere. I kin swear to that if I'm called on."

"It ain't for shooting Ches that I went on the dodge," Van frowningly confided. "I never touched the lying cur. He framed me, falling down when my gun went off, and having his own bunch of crooks ring around him and carry him out in the back room. Ches was a damned coward — always was. I've knowed him the last ten years. He framed me on a card game in his saloon, and then bellered around that he'd run me outa town next time I rode in. I went back, same as anybody would that had any nerve.

"He had the shooting framed too, most likely. He knew damn' well I wouldn't kill him — and he knew why. But he fixed it so I'd take a shot his way, and then he aimed to kill me and get away with it on self-defense. Only reason why he didn't was that something went wrong with his gun. Then he tried to rib the boys up to lynch

me, but they wouldn't do it. I dunno what more he was framing when I busted the deputy on the head and beat it. And that's why I'm wanted; not for shooting Ches Baker."

"Yeh, that there deputy'd shore love to git a crack at yuh fer that. He much as said so."

"Which way did he head outa here, Snub?"

"Well," Snub said dubiously, "I tole 'im to look for yuh down in the Wall, an' from there on up into Montana."

"The devil you did!" Van's eyebrows pinched together.

"Hell, I never dremp' you'd be fool enough t' come back up here!" Snub protested, answering the look. "Reese an' Jockey said they rode part way with yuh, and you was headed south with the LM herd. They never said you aimed to come on back. I was steerin' that off'cer away from yuh, as I s'posed."

"Yeah, but it happens you steered him right along the trail I've got to take if I find that saddle horse the gang roped outa the herd. And find him I will, if I have to hunt through every corral between here and Canada. Snub, it was her horse they got; one she broke to the saddle herself."

"Yeh, I know. Yuh talked fer four solid hours about it las' night. When yuh rode in here you was like a crazy man. I shore thought yuh was drunk, ole boy, till I seen yuh didn't have no whisky breath. You wouldn't talk about nothin' but how you'd find Query if yuh had to beef every horse thief in the country to git 'im."

"I wasn't able to rustle grub, so I hadn't eaten anything much for a couple of days. And my leg was raising Cain with me. That's what ailed me, I guess," said Van sheepishly.

"Anyway, time you git able to ride ag'in, that deputy 'll be back home in Paradise, mebby, where he belongs," Snub added hopefully. "You ain't likely to meet up with him, Van. You'll be a couple weeks behind him, chances is."

"Yes, but the point is, every man on the range will know that Van Patten is being hunted up in this country. Might as well get out with a brass band. He'll spread the glad tidings all over the Wall country."

"Oh, I dunno. Mebbe he'll make it a still hunt an' not say nothin' about what he's after." Having done the mischief, Snub was persistently looking for an optimistic angle.

"He didn't still-hunt around here in Lost Cabin, evidently, since he told you all about what he was up here for, and why. Snub, I ain't blaming you, but I believe in facing the facts and then make plans according. That pelican is a long ways across his county line, and that means he's got the papers to take me in wherever he makes connections. He ain't going to ride away off up here and inquire around a little and then turn around and ride back. That geezer's got his eye on the sheriff's job and election is this coming fall. He's been making the go-getter play ever since last election, and he's making it now."

"Hunh! You ain't skeered of him, I hope?"

Van lifted himself up on his good leg, poised there until he had measured distances and got his balance, and then hitched himself over to the bunk where he lay down with a thankful sigh that a painful job had been well done.

"Nope," he said then, "I ain't scared, exactly. But I sure do feel like laying low till I've got two good legs under me. If that jasper comes back this way, keep Spider under cover, will yuh, Snub? Walt Pearson knows the horse."

"Won't know 'im if he don't see 'im — an' he

won't see 'im unless he busts the lock on my stable. 'F he gits funny enough t' do a thing like that, chances is I'll kill 'im an' go on the dodge m'self. Your horse is in a box stall as big as this hull room, an' that's where he'll stay except mebbe a little while in the c'rell at night with me standin' guard.

"Anyway," he finished, with one of his inimitable grins, " that Paradise law-houn' ain't here no more. I s'pose he's got all the Hole-in-the-Wall boys chased into the brush by now. An' if he ain't heard lead bumblebees hummin' down in them canyons, I miss my guess."

Van Patten lay staring up at the blackened roof, thinking. Snub was right; leaden bumblebees, as he called them, were likely to buzz around any stranger who rode down into the Wall. He did not like the thought of Walt Pearson riding in there and getting shot, any more than he liked the idea of having Pearson dogging his trail while he rode seeking that king among saddle horses, Query of the LM herd.

But presently his eyelids drooped lower and lower over his tired eyes that had indomitably faced sun and wind with fever-distorted vision

that had blurred unaccountably in the last few torturing hours, so that it was the horse and not the man which traveled straight to the sanctuary of Snub Epperson's big corral in Lost Cabin. Now that he could lie at ease, with food in his stomach and a soothing lotion on his wound, even Snub's rambling talk of the deputy sheriff could not hold him back from sleep. His lids lifted, drooped slowly and lay quiet.

"Hey?" Snub stopped short in the middle of a particularly pungent diatribe and canted a bird-like glance toward the bunk. A long, gently exhaled breath just breaking through into audibility answered him, and Snub chuckled and reached for the St. Jacob's oil.

"Thought I'd talk him to sleep — the darned mule-headed cuss," he muttered, as he bared his swollen and aching knee.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE TRAIL LEADS INTO HOLE-IN-THE-WALL

With a nimble-footed pack horse trailing behind him at the end of a new lead rope with just enough slack to make progress easiest for the two horses, Van Patten rode warily down a rough, dim trail which he had not seen for more than two years, but which seemed even more devious and difficult to follow than when last he had passed over it; as if during the long interval no traveler had come that way.

Down steep, wooded canyons it twisted, then up over rocky ridges that made hard scrambling for the horses, and down again into some narrow defile where an army might have lain in ambush and never shown a hat crown; or along bare ledges where a misstep would abruptly end the journey for horse and rider, and where a bullet might come whining from across the canyon to show an unwelcome wayfarer what lay just beyond the death chill.

Below him, hidden away under the ragged peaks

of the Big Horn Mountains, lay that almost impregnable retreat which strangers called Hole-in-the-Wall, though others more intimately acquainted with the place spoke of it simply as " the Wall." A deep, oval valley it was, guarded by the mountains on one side and by a huge rampart of rock which was the " Wall " on the other; with Buffalo Creek running through the length of it and the sides wrinkled into innumerable deep little canyons and secret basins where strangers seldom ventured and even a Wall man went circumspectly, careful to make himself known by song or whistle or studied monologue addressed ostentatiously to the horse he bestrode. For this was in the days far back in range history, when Hole-in-the-Wall offered sanctuary to men who carried a higher market price in county seats than did the finest animal they could steal.

The pack horse was a concession to Snub Epperson's stubborn solicitude. A canny old fellow was Snub, and during the ten days of Van Patten's forced retirement he had argued against a swift invasion into so hostile a country as Van conceded Hole-in-the-Wall to be. Snub held out for a pack load of supplies, including a rifle and

plenty of ammunition, backed by a deputy sheriff's star which the county sheriff would be only too glad to supply on the condition that Van Patten would bring back a certain much-wanted man — should Van run across him.

"'Tain't likely yuh will," Snub offered comfortingly. "But still yuh might, and they's two thousand dollars waitin' in Casper fer the feller that does bring 'im in. And if yuh're a deputy sheriff yerself, yuh'll have the right t' take that horse yuh're after, no matter where yuh find 'im."

"I don't need any star for that, and I ain't lost any bank robber, either," Van Patten retorted brusquely.

"Well, I was talkin' to the sheriff up in the store — he's here about somethin' else — and it just struck me ——"

"You want to look out," Van had warned. "You'll get struck just once too often. I'm on the dodge. That's as good a password as I want down in the Wall."

They had wrangled for days and Van had compromised at last.

"I'll take that pack horse along if it'll make you sleep any easier, but soon as I get me a hide-

out and the grub cached where I can have it to fall back on, I'll turn the horse loose. So you better set a price on him and I'll pay it before I start out. And that's final."

So here he was with the pack horse named Riley, which Snub declared was tough as whalebone and quick as a cat. The hide on Riley's left hip twitched incessantly to keep the flies away from a fresh burn where Van had painstakingly blotched the old brand and applied his own after buying him. Snub had grinned at that outlaw touch and had admitted that a blotched brand was a gilt-edged credential down in the Wall, and that Van's V Bar looked bold and bad. Which, true or not, shows what kind of reputation Hole-in-the-Wall had at that time.

On a wooded slope a she bear and two cubs were industriously digging grubs from under a rotting log. Many a time Spider had hunted bear with Van, and now he threw up his head to stare interestedly, perhaps wondering if his master meant to take down his rope and give chase. Spider rather liked the excitement of roping bears, which gave him a chance to help best a hereditary enemy whose conquest was a matter of pride. His mas-

ter's elation when the big brute was finally dispatched always thrilled the big sorrel pleasurably, so that he walked proudly afterwards, conscious of his power.

But Riley reacted unpleasantly to bears. He snorted and whirled, jerking the lead rope from Van's fingers, and stampeded down the hill into the canyon, utterly heedless of the way his pack bumped against trees as he fled. Van perforce took after him, untying his rope as he went. Where the pack horse had slid down the last steep bank that rimmed the canyon floor, the big sorrel stiffened his legs and tobogganed twenty feet to the bottom.

By the time Spider gathered himself together, Riley was galloping wildly down the canyon, heedless of everything save putting distance between himself and that bear family. The chase continued for half a mile or more, zigzagging through trees and around rock cairns and points where the ridge nosed out into the ravine, before Spider could forge up within throwing distance and let Van get his rope over the little bay.

Van dismounted and walked up to the horse, eyeing him keenly and with respect. For Spider,

you must know, was not accustomed to running half a mile before he overtook a horse that had so slight a start of him. Moreover, a full pack makes an uneasy load to race under, the dead weight riding without rhythm as does a man.

"You little son-of-a-gun!" chuckled Van Patten, picking up the lead rope that should by rights have caught on some rock or bush and stopped Riley perforce. "I don't know about turning you loose, after all!"

He remounted and proceeded slowly down the canyon, wishing he knew just where he would bring up and hoping it would not be in some outlaw's dooryard, where the welcome might be altogether too warm for Van's purpose. Getting back up the ridge was not worth the effort, he decided, turning in the saddle to scan the steep acclivity. He had never explored the canyons so near the head of the Wall, but he meant to explore this one now.

Like the ravines at the lower end of the valley, this one broke into ramifications through which no stranger could hope to ride a straight course or guess where he would come out. Most of the gulches were wooded along the slopes, with grassy

floors and little streams fed by springs. Any one of them would furnish an excellent hide-out — if Van were only sufficiently well acquainted with the country to be able to make his way in and out without confusion.

But the neighborhood would need to be thoroughly explored before he would dare attempt a headquarters here. Therefore he rode on, keeping to the main canyon and going at a leisurely pace that he might study landmarks and likely looking gulches as he passed them.

But presently the canyon he was in came to an abrupt end against a cliff which rose straight up to a bare knob of a hill. A spring seeped out from a crack in the wall and tinkled into a small pool. He dismounted and drank thirstily, lying flat on his stomach with his hat beside him on the ground. Riley and Spider moved up and drank eagerly, knees crooked and the swallows sliding in hard lumps down their gullets. Van Patten sat back on his heels and watched them, smiling a little in friendly sympathy with their gratification in the coldness of the water.

Since the afternoon was late, it seemed to him that he might do worse than camp right where he

was, or perhaps a little farther back where the canyon drew in at the sides to a fifty-foot chasm. Across that he could stretch his pack rope and hold the horses impounded in a high-walled pasture where the grass was sufficient, and that spring under the cliff was a never-failing joy to man and beast.

He reflected that if he camped now he could climb the hill and get a look at the surrounding country before dark, and see if he were near any ranch or camp. It seemed to him that he must be within a mile or two of the Jim McBride ranch — a place he would much prefer to avoid. Jim McBride did not love him overmuch. Unless he had changed considerably in the last two years, no meeting between them could be particularly peaceful.

He considered the matter while the horses drank their fill, then having decided to camp he led them back to the rock gateway and removed pack and saddle, slapped each horse affectionately on the shoulder and watched them circle slowly, nosing the ground in a shady spot before they crumpled down to roll. A healthy sign, Van always considered that little performance; proof

that they were not too tired from the grilling trip through the hills.

He had not lost sight of his purpose in venturing down into the Wall, but as he selected his camp site under one shelving ledge that jutted straight out into the canyon, he moved briskly and with the tranquil sense of well-being which all outdoor men feel when they strike a pleasant camp ground at the end of a long day's journey. He stretched his rope across the gap in the rocky barrier, and set out the things he would need for his supper. He was hungry, and he decided to cook the meal before he started any exploring. Then, if he prolonged his climb, he would not need to grope around in the uncertain light of the fire.

Van Patten was not careless of danger, and he sought the driest sticks for his fire and made a small one, Indian style. He did not know who might be spying upon him from the surrounding hills, and for all his seeming nonchalance he was alert to small sounds that might betray the approach of an enemy, and he kept an eye on the canyon sides.

But even when he had toiled up the steep slope of the highest ridge in the neighborhood and stood

finally beside a tree on the very crest, he could discern no sign that this part of the valley contained any living soul save himself. Not even a wild animal moved within the range of his vision trained to distances. Snub Epperson had given him a pair of field glasses, and with these he scanned as much of the Wall country as he could see, without discovering any moving thing larger than the birds that flew over the ridge or soared out above the valley.

Yet something zipped past his head, and even as he ducked he was spattered with bits of bark from the tree beside him where a second bullet struck.

"Some of them lead hornets!" he grunted, and slid undignifiedly down into a clump of brush that filled a small wrinkle in the hillside. Two faint rifle reports came as he was getting out of sight, but the echo of the surrounding hills confused his sense of direction, especially since he was busy removing the target from that immediate locality.

He slid cautiously down as far as the bushes extended, and with the field glasses he examined the whole ridge before him. The marksman had been shooting at long range — the perceptible

pause between the arrival of the bullets and the report of the discharge proved that. But long-range shooting was common enough in the Wall country, and as a rule such shots were fired merely as warnings against intruders. Van knew that well enough. But he also knew that a hit was not looked upon with regret, even though the shooter had not intended to do more than bark a notification to keep off.

The lowering sun struck slantwise under the trees on the ridge, laying a golden light upon the grass. Van Patten sat with elbows resting on knees drawn up to steady the glasses, and looked until his eyes watered. But all he saw was a line of cattle winding down a trail along the side of a canyon to drink at the creek that reflected the clouds in still pools below.

The canyon where he had made camp lay beyond the ridge behind him, and while he realized the uselessness of trying to sight the fellow who had shot at him, he decided to stay where he was until dusk. To get over that bald summit without being seen was impossible before daylight faded, and he had no intention of giving the spy a clue to his whereabouts that night. Among the dozens

of canyons and ravines, it would be a bare chance that would send any prowlers into that particular box canyon. He would have to risk it, anyway.

It seemed a long time that he sat there, and he was glad now that he had eaten before he essayed the climb; he would not need to build any betraying fire that night, at least. That all his plans should go awry because of the pack horse seemed likely, unless he moved carefully for the next few days. He had not meant to reveal himself to any one in the Wall, until he had looked around a little. He knew of a place where he would feel fairly secure — for a month if necessary — but now he did not know just how best to reach that spot, for climbing back up to the trail on the ridge was impossible unless he were lucky enough to find a break in that last high bank. For although a horse may slide down an almost sheer bank, getting him up it is another matter, and so far as Van Patten had been able to determine, the wiry little pack horse had by good luck found the only place where he would not have broken his neck in the descent.

No, he must find his way out of the maze of canyons and down the valley to the point where

the hill trail came down to the creek, and then make his way up that trail to the place where he had meant to leave it; a matter that would require a little time, he judged.

He lifted the glasses for a last long look at the blurred hillsides, then scrambled back up the tiny gulch, reached the crest of the ridge and made his way down into the canyon where he had left the horses.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

VAN LOSES HIS GRUB AND FINDS A CABIN

VAN PATTEN awoke from the uneasy dream that he was dead, and that Lea Moore Baker was singing at his funeral. He dreamed she sang:

"We shall meet, we shall meet, we shall meet beyond the river!
We shall meet beyond the river, where the surges cease to roll!"

He was trying to attract her attention, so that he could tell her the song was very inappropriate, when he found himself sitting up, fighting the blanket which had somehow become wound around his head in such a manner that he was half suffocated.

As he fought free, gasping the cool dawn air into his lungs, he could have sworn that he heard, somewhere above him and very faint, a fragment of the song "—shall meet beyond the river ——"

No one was near, however. Certainly no woman would be singing up there in the hills be-

fore sunrise. He had pulled the blanket up in his sleep while the chill night was upon the canyon, and his lungs, suffering from bad air, had sent a warning call to his brain. No wonder he had dreamed that he was shut inside a coffin! The woman's voice singing hymns was merely an elaboration of the funeral idea, and since Lea Moore Baker was the only woman who ever had occupied his deeper thoughts, it was natural that she should fit into the picture his sleeping brain had conjured.

All this shuttled through his mind as he got up and stood looking about him. But it was strange that an echo of the song should have persisted beyond the waking point, even for the few seconds when he thought he heard it. He listened while he inhaled deep breaths of the winelike air to relieve his lungs of that sense of suffocation. The canyon was still, the voice of his dreams was silent.

But the experience had shocked him fully awake and the nightmare of being closed into a coffin still rode him unpleasantly. Birds were beginning to cheep and twitter. In a tree high up the slope an owl kept solemnly reiterating,

"Who? Who? Who?" Away off in another canyon he heard the faint ululation of a coyote returning from the night's hunting.

More than a little disgusted with himself, Van Patten made a cigarette and sat down on his blanket to smoke. What had got into him, that he should roll his head in the blanket and dream that he was dead and that some one was singing hymns over his coffin? He felt distinctly foolish — an unaccustomed mood for Van Patten, whose nerves were steady as his eyes when he looked at a man who might be an enemy.

Well, since it was morning, he would have some breakfast and see if he could discover which canyon led into the valley. To the marksman who had thrown bark in his eyes last evening he gave some thought, but there was no profit in trying to guess who the fellow might be. Times change swiftly, down in the Wall. Men had died, usually a quick and violent death. Men had left the country, other men had come in to take their places for a while. A few ranchers would probably remain, no doubt; Jim McBride, for instance. But on the whole Van felt sure that in two years the Wall would hold more strangers than old ac-

quaintances, which would be as well for Van Patten.

He started a small fire against the rocks, and went to the niche where he had piled his provisions away from small marauders. There he discovered, with something of a shock, that nothing was left him except a carton of smoking tobacco. His bacon, coffee, flour, salt — all had disappeared. That tobacco carton, standing lonesomely in the recess that had seemed to him so perfect an outdoor pantry, formed an incongruous note that affected him unpleasantly.

Now the bad dream seemed to carry a certain significance, yet he could not for the life of him see how the theft of his grub supply should make him dream he was dead, or give him that odd hallucination of hearing a woman's voice singing a hymn well adapted to funerals. It must be that he had been disturbed by some vague noise and had rolled over in the blanket without awaking.

He gave up trying to explain it and went to see if the horses were safe. He found them standing beside the spring, and when they spied him both heads went up, Spider's nostrils flaring

wide as he nickered a greeting. Evidently the horses had not been disturbed — and in the Wall country it was the horses that needed the most careful watching. In a nest of horse thieves such as Hole-in-the-Wall was reputed to be, two such animals as Spider and Riley would have been taken first, with possibly the grub for good measure. And there was no chance that the marauder had not known of the horses, for the rope stretched across the gap between the rocks where the food was cached would have proven their presence.

Van Patten led them back to where the riding outfit lay unmolested, and saddled up. The smoking tobacco he packed with a shrug of the shoulders. The thief probably did not approve of his brand of tobacco. But since he had been robbed of all his matches save the few he had in his pocket, he did not anticipate any inordinate indulgence in cigarettes, even though they would serve to dull his hunger, which by the way, was rapidly assuming the proportions of famine, now that he knew he had nothing to eat.

There were tracks, of course; they were the imprints of cheap, broad-toed boots with rundown

heels that left a sloping blur in the sand next the ledge. Van studied the marks until he was certain he would recognize them if he saw them again. Then, having nothing else to do, he rode down to the spring, drank deeply of the clear, cold water and filled the saddle canteen which he always carried even in that land of many streams.

His evening up on the ridge had not been entirely wasted, for now he knew the approximate point where the valley nicked deepest into the hills, and he believed he had some idea of the location of the canyons opening upon the level and could make some sort of guess as to the ravine he should follow. Even so, he took the wrong ones and was obliged to go back two or three miles when he arrived at points where the gorges drew into narrow, rock-filled chasms where even a kangaroo would have needed wings to carry him over some of the rounded boulders. There were many such, and Van seemed to choose them all.

It was late afternoon and hunger was gnawing like rats at his vitals when at last he rode out of a narrow defile, pinched together in places so that Van's stirrups scraped the rock walls on either

side, and came suddenly into a grassy basin with trees dotted over it in clumps branch-deep in bushes. The high hills to the west cast shadows to the eastern eminence, making the place seem cool and very tranquil, with a brook rambling out from some hidden spring and the grass knee high to the horses.

Grown wary as a coyote, Van pulled up to survey the place before he ventured farther. It seemed an ideal location for any one who desired complete seclusion, but Van Patten knew the Wall country of old. It was just such secret little basins that made the valley an outlaw paradise, and he was too wise to jump at the conclusion that this place was uninhabited just because it looked as though his eyes were the first to rest upon it.

Spider, that wise range horse, perked his ears and stared steadily toward a larger grove to the left, where the little stream apparently had its source. The pack horse, too, seemed to center his interest in that direction. Wherefore Van Patten took the hint and rode that way, whistling the chorus of a song now forgotten but at that time exceedingly popular, the words of which ran:

One thought of mother at home alone,
Feeble and old and gray;
One of the sweetheart he'd left in town,
Happy and young and gay.
One kissed a ringlet of thin gray hair,
One kissed a lock of brown,
Bidding farewell to the stars and stripes
Just as the sun went down.

The song did not lack significance, since for all Van Patten knew he might be bidding farewell to his quest for the brown horse Query, " just as the sun went down." But although he whistled the chorus through to the end and then sang it in a mild, pleasing tenor voice of the kind often heard around camp fires, he drew no result save the startled whir of a quail flushed from her nest in the tall grass.

The big sorrel, stepping out briskly and as if he knew where he was headed for, edged behind the nearest and largest thicket, Van giving him his head. He brought up at the rear wall of a log cabin and stopped, looking back at his master as if he would ask his opinion of this destination. Van urged him on to the other corner, from where he could see a shed, and beyond that a dim trail

leading upward into a cleft in the rock wall which enclosed the head of the retreat.

"Hello!" called Van Patten cheerfully, his hand gripping his gun and his eyes searching in every direction.

He waited, then shouted again, louder than before; by the silence but more by Spider's serene attitude, Van concluded that the place was at least temporarily deserted. He swung a leg over the cantle and stepped cautiously to the ground, his narrowed eyes watchful.

But no one answered his third call, or gave a sign. Van waited one minute, two, three. Then, silent as a cat walking in snow, he crowded past the horses and tiptoed along the cabin wall to the corner farthest from where he had shouted the conventional range greeting; he listened there for a space and made his way around the corner. A door in that end was locked from the inside, perhaps with a stout bar across. He went on, past a little window high up in the wall like an overgrown loophole, edged around another corner, and so came to the door commonly used.

True to the range custom of unlocked cabins, this door was closed only by a leather strap nailed

to the planking and buckled into another likewise fastened securely to the casing. Beside the door was another window, but too narrow for a man's body to pass through. Some Wall man's secret stronghold, Van Patten instantly judged the place; but the buckled straps silently declared that the owner was away, so Van took his hand off his gun, unbuckled the door and let himself in.

This might be the home of an outlaw, but his bachelor housekeeping was above reproach. The floor had been lately scrubbed, and the tapping branches of tall bushes against the high windows scraped neither cobwebs nor dust from the little panes. A white oilcloth of the kind called "marbled" was on the table set against one wall, and the cloth was clean. The stove had been washed — your range bachelor seldom affects stove blacking. On the stove stood a coffee pot still warm to the touch, a pot of beans boiled with bacon and mushy with much cooking. In the box cupboard, revealed by the looped-up curtain of calico with peacocks strutting among great poppies, a plate of fried venison drew Van's hungry glance like a hypnotist's crystal ball.

With a thick slice in his fingers, Van Patten

backed to a bunk and sat down, chewing avidly the juicy meat with fat congealed in the creases. He did not care who lived there. The law of the range land gave him the freedom of the place, and he filled a plate with beans, found some very good sour-dough bread, poured himself a tin cup of lukewarm coffee and broke his long fast with keener relish than he would have known at a king's banquet.

When he could swallow no more, Van Patten went out and gathered wood, and while a kettle of water was heating, he led the horses down to a corral he had glimpsed in the lower end of the grove, unsaddled them and turned them inside.

He had washed his plate and cup and was wiping out the enameled dishpan when the door was pushed open and a man walked in, one hand swung backward in a singularly expressive pose which did not match the smile on his wide, thin-lipped mouth.

"Why, hello, Van!" he greeted easily, after a slight hesitation. "Where in all git-out did you drop down from?"

"Hello, Bill," Van Patten returned, matching the other's friendly tone. "Didn't know whose

camp this was, but I rode in with my belly glued to my backbone, and it took considerable grub to pry 'em apart. You sure are a prize cook, Hayfoot."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HAYFOOT HAS A STORY TO TELL

Bill Heyford (called Hayfoot all through northern Wyoming in that blithe disregard for accuracy in pronouncing a man's name which is one of the breezy ways of the West) took off his hat and tossed it negligently upon one of the two bunks.

"I have to eat my own cookin' so dawgoned much I'd likely take a shot at myself some day if I got too darn sick of the grub. How's everything outside? You been off the range quite a while, ain't yuh?"

"Not so long. Couple of years, maybe. Been down south of Casper, breaking horses."

"And you never got away with more 'n them two in the corral?" Heyford laughed, but his eyes were searching Van's face.

"I only got off with one — and he's my own private mount. The little bay I — er — picked up just lately." Van laughed slyly.

"Yeah, I seen the brand was fresh. Looks like a good little pony."

"All right for a pack horse," Van answered indifferently. "Well, how's the old Wall coming along?"

"Fine and dandy," Heyford told him equably, pushing the coffee pot forward on the stove as he lifted the lid to see if the brew would need replenishing.

"Ain't seen any deputy sheriff from down Paradise way, have you, Bill?"

Heyford shot him a lightning glance from under his brows.

"No-o — not that I know of. What fer lookin' feller?"

"Big, beefy cuss. Buttermilk eyes and a scraggy mustache that might be Swede color if he didn't spit so much tobacco through it. I expect maybe he's got the mark of a gun barrel across his dome where the hair is thin."

Heyford's close-set eyes flickered with what might have been amusement. He was just taking down a frying-pan to warm what was left of the venison, and he paused with the skillet in his hand while he looked at Van inquiringly.

"Oh, it wasn't so damn' one-sided," Van grinned. "I got a hole bored in my leg it took my rifle ramrod to clean. Heard he was up through this country, and I didn't know but what he'd try hazing me outa the brush down in here."

"Might try it, all right — but I wouldn't worry much about it, Van, if I was you. She's a big old valley, and they's consid'able brush here an' there."

"Oh, I ain't worrying a damn' bit, Hayfoot. I just wondered if he's down here."

Heyford busied himself between cupboard and cook stove, laying the venison in the pan, slicing boiled potatoes to fry.

"No, don't think he's here," he said, after Van had ceased waiting for a reply. Then, "Where's your pack?" Heyford's eyes bored into Van Patten's. "Or maybe you figure on packin' out the deputy from Paradise?"

Van was not startled, as a stranger to the Wall might have been. He had taken it for granted that Bill Heyford had inspected his horses and his outfit before venturing near the cabin.

"No, I wasn't aiming to make any keepsake outa that fellow. Don't want nothing of him,

Hayfoot. It's him that wants me. Somebody stole all the grub I had, last night. Back up here in a blind canyon. Took everything but my smoking tobacco." His eyes never left Bill Heyford's face.

He saw the startled look come into Bill's eyes, saw his cheek muscles shrink and stiffen, saw his lips thin to a brown line. Bill stared at him, his eyes shining slits in the fading light.

"Where was that?"

"Search me, Bill. Pack horse stampeded from a bear up on the trail, and got down into this mess of canyons back here. I camped in one; spring at the end, under a cliff. This morning my entire grubstake was missing."

"That right?" Bill leaned slightly toward him, speaking mechanically.

"That's right, Hayfoot." Van's tone carried conviction. "That's why I was so hollow when I rode in here. Didn't like to chance shooting anything to eat unless I had to. I was up on the ridge last night trying to see my way out to the valley, and somebody whanged away at me a couple of times."

"Hunh?" The sound seemed jolted out of

Heyford's throat. "Oh, I guess that was me, Van," he added apologetically. "I was up on the ridge huntin', and I seen somebody across from me — looked like a gun shine. So I took a shot or two, just for luck. Thought I knowed who it was, but I guess I was mistaken."

"It was me," said Van simply and ungrammatically. "I had a pair of field glasses along. Well, that's all in a day's wash. You didn't glom my grub, did you, Hayfoot? 'Cause if you did, by thunder, I'm liable to board it out — and make you do all the cooking!"

Heyford grinned perfunctorily, his eyes on the potatoes he was hashing in the frying-pan.

"Help yourself, old-timer. That's damn' funny about that grub. Any tracks?"

"Two or three, right close to where I had it piled. I'd know 'em if I saw 'em again — or at least I think I would. Big square-toed brogans, and the heels all wore off on the side. One sole was broke clear through, so the track left a ridge across the ball of the foot. I'd know it if I saw it again."

"That wouldn't be your deputy," Heyford observed after a silence. "Officers go well shod,

I've noticed. So do riders," he added, catching Van's involuntary glance at his well-booted feet, small for so tall a man and with the high, sloping heels of a skilled horseman who has a horror of being dragged to death with a foot jammed through the stirrup. "Don't know who it could be."

The mystery seemed to worry him. He took a lamp down from the top shelf of the cupboard, flicked a match across his thumb nail, lifted the clean lamp chimney and lighted the wick.

"Old Pitchfork Logan wears brogans," he said, setting the lamp in the center of the table and turning back to the stove to dish up his supper. "Wouldn't be Pitchfork, though. You can't git him outa the house after dark, hardly."

"He must be a new one in the Wall," Van remarked. "Never heard of him before. Why Pitchfork?"

Bill Heyford did not answer immediately. He was busy taking up potatoes, meat and beans in enameled dishes and arranging them neatly on the table.

"Better have something more," he invited. "Cup of coffee, anyway." When Van shook his

head, Heyford slid into a homemade chair and reached for the sugar.

"Pitchfork's a family man," he elucidated at last. "Come in here couple uh years ago with his family; crazy wife and a boy about fourteen an' a girl fifteen, maybe. Boys started in ridin' over there to see the girl — Mary, her name was ——"

"Was? She dead?"

"Unh-huh. Well, the old man used to run 'em off with a pitchfork; fellers that went to see Mary. She was a right nice little thing. Old man worked her to death, accordin' to some. I wasn't to the funeral myself. Old Pitchfork claims she got throwed off a horse an' her head caved in. Maybe she did."

"Wall's getting tame," Van said dryly, "if the boys here will stand for being chased off with a pitchfork."

"Oh, I dunno." Heyford helped himself to potatoes. "Girl's dad has got a right to herd the boys away from his place, I guess. Anyway, the Wall boys seem to think so."

Van Patten smoked, sitting on the edge of a bunk with his elbows on his knees, weighing Hey-

ford's story and wondering if this hard-natured old man called Pitchfork could be the thief. The loss of a month's supply of provisions is no light matter to a man who expects to live strictly on his own resources. Van considered the crime next to horse stealing in heinousness, as would any other range man.

"Say, Bill, this fellow you call Pitchfork — he uses tobacco, don't he? Do you know what brand? But then, any fellow that smokes ain't liable to steal everything else and leave a whole carton of Durham. And," he added, frowning in thought, "he ain't liable to overlook a thing like that, either."

Heyford set down his cup and wiped his lips on his handkerchief.

"Well, now, I don't know. Old Logan chews, I think. I ain't never been around him much. And since the girl died, he's been queer; no tellin' what he might do. He wouldn't want no tobacco to give away to his friends, because he ain't got any."

"Whereabouts does he live?"

Heyford hesitated, glancing sidelong at Van Patten. Down in Hole-in-the-Wall, men did not

direct strangers to their neighbors' homes. And although Van Patten was not altogether a stranger, neither was he one of the Wall inhabitants; nor ever had been, for that matter.

"Down on the river, three, four miles," Heyford said shortly. "No use goin' down there — it wasn't old Logan that stole your grub, and he's bad medicine."

"What made you say he won't leave the house after dark? A man like him wouldn't be scared of nothing, would he?"

"He might." Heyford spoke laconically. "I would, in his place."

Van sat up, looking straight at him, and the silent urging to explain himself had its effect upon Heyford.

"It's the girl," he said reluctantly. "I ain't sup'stitious myself, but I heard her, one night — or thought I did. She used to sing to the old lady sometimes to quiet her down when she got to goin' on about the boy. He run away — so the old man claimed — but the old lady's off in her head, and she gits spells of cryin' and screamin' and takin' on, claimin' he's dead. So the girl would sing to 'er and that'd quiet 'er

down. That's what some uh the boys say that's been there.

"Well, the story goes that since the girl died — 'course there ain't a thing to it — but they say she sings outside the house at night an' it quiets the old lady right down every time. But old Pitchfork shuts himself up in the kitchen, humped over the stove like he's scared half to death. You couldn't hire him to go night-riding, I don't believe. Pitchfork can't keep a man on the place, no more. She sings up and down the valley — I've heard her myself. Or thought I did." Heyford sent an involuntary glance toward the window over the table.

Van Patten rose and stood looking down at the other with a queer, questioning look in his eyes.

"What does she sing, Bill? Does she sing, 'We shall meet beyond the river'?"

"How in hell'd *you* know?" Bill Heyford sprang up and stood facing Van. "You've been in the Wall longer'n since yesterday, and I got a notion to call yuh on that deputy sheriff yarn, Van Patten."

"Aw, don't get excited, Bill." Van laughed at

him. "I asked you because I thought I heard a woman singing that song last night. Just did hear it, and that was all. I thought I dreamed it."

Heyford eyed him.

"Where was that?"

"Where I was camped, of course. I thought I heard a piece of that song just as it was coming daylight. It sounded up on the hill and quite a long ways off."

Bill sat down again, reaching in his pocket for the makings of a cigarette. Neither spoke while Bill made himself a cigarette and lighted it. Van Patten stood leaning against the wall, his whole posture speaking of indolent ease, his eyes narrowed and noting every move the other made.

A bystander would have felt the tensity of the atmosphere and would have seen that Heyford knew Van Patten was prepared to "beat him to the draw." The fact that Van Patten never had killed a man carried no weight in the mind of Bill Heyford, for Van had a disconcerting ability to plant lead most painfully in a man's person, and the average range man would as soon be dead as crippled for life. Wherefore, Bill Heyford sat

quiet and busied himself with his cigarette, until the tension eased perforce.

"Yeah, I've thought I heard it too," he said at last. "Once I was ridin' down past Logan's place, and I'd 'a' swore I heard Mary Logan singin' that song, over in the woods where the house sets. She's buried in that grove. It sure is funny — it's got the hull Wall on aidge. Pitchfork can't git a man in the Wall to work for 'im. Puts 'im up ag'inst it, kinda. He's breakin', they say — fast. He'll be crazy as the old woman if he keeps on."

"Pretty human kinda voice for a ghost," Van Patten made critical comment, after a slight pause. He was still watchful of Bill Heyford and still concealing his vigilance. "I might of dreamed it. It was just as I was waking up, and I'd dreamed about hearing somebody sing — somebody I used to know. I guess it was a dream."

"Mine wasn't no dream," Heyford declared, watching a smoke ring go sailing toward the window. "I was ridin' right by the grove, and Mary's mother was there by the grave, cryin' an' takin' on an' callin' for the girl to come back. It

was moonlight and I could see the grave through the trees an' see the old lady layin' acrost it, cryin'.

" An' then the singin' commenced. It sounded like it was down by the river, but up kinda high. It was that 'We-shall-meet-beyond-the-river' hymn tune. She sung it through from beginning to end — er somethin' did. My horse heard it — you know how horses is, Van; head up an' listenin' as if he kinda liked it.

" Thing that got me, kinda, was the way the old lady acted. She set up an' listened, an' purty soon she commenced to join in on the chorus. An' her voice was queer. Full of her sobbin' an' cryin', an' then it got kinda glad soundin', as if she believed every word of it an' was dead sure she was goin' to meet Mary.

" That was when it commenced on 'The Sweet By and By!' The old woman stood up an' raised her arms toward the singin' an' her voice was kinda shrill an' happy, kinda like a camp-meetin' revival. You've mebby been to one. My folks was Methodists an' I remember when I was a kid ——"

" That's the way she sung — the old woman, I

mean. Mary used to have an awful sweet voice. I've heard her once or twice. This singin' was sweet. High an' clear as a bell, like she'd oughta sound if she's an angel — an' I guess she is, all right enough. But it was the old woman's singin' that got me. Cryin' an' shoutin' happy, an' singin':

" 'In the swee-eet by an' by-y —
We shall meet on that beau-tee-ful sho-re!
In the sweet by-an'-by
We shall meet on that beautiful shore!'

It sure as hell give me the creeps."

Van sat down, thoughtfully flicking the ash off his cigarette. Bill Heyford stirred, sighed and wiped the burning end of his cigarette lightly across the edge of his plate.

" I never turned tail to a man," he said slowly, " but I sure did fan it away from there that night. What it was I dunno. There ain't a woman in the Wall that could sing like that to save their lives. Like Mary Logan, I mean, when she was alive — or like that singin' up over the river that night. It was her voice — or awful like her voice. The old woman sure thought so too. She thought it was Mary."

"How could it be Mary, if the girl's dead?"

"Search me," Heyford offered laconically. "The girl's dead, all right; buried in that cottonwood grove. Quite a few folks went to her funeral. And if that wasn't her singing hymn tunes to her mother, *what was it? Something* was singin' 'em. I was cold sober, an' I heard it. An' my horse, he stood with his head up an' his ears pointed toward the river, listenin' to it. He heard it, same as I did an' same as the old woman heard it."

"Queer," said Van Patten.

"Damn' right it's queer. That's why it give me a jolt when you knowed the name of the hymn tune Mary Logan sings — or her ghost." Bill glanced half apologetically toward Van Patten. "You know yourself it'd jolt a feller some ——"

"Sure," Van Patten readily admitted. "I'd likely come up shooting if it had been me. Sounded like I'd called the turn, I guess. You had a right to take it that way, Bill."

"Sure jolted me. Made me think fer a minute your whole talk was a stall. An' you know yourself that your friends don't try to string yuh along like that. They don't have to."

"That's right, too. I don't blame you, Hayfoot."

"Well, if you're tired as I am, you'll want to hit the hay. Ain't much beddin' on that bunk, but you got your own blankets, I see. Help yourself, Van. Bring in your bed roll, an' then I'll lock the door." Heyford smiled bleakly. "Only time I lock up is when I'm inside."

"I get you," Van Patten grinned. "And that suits me right down to the ground. That wasn't no lie about the deputy that's trailing me up, and I'm dead willing to pull the hole in after me when I lay me down to sleep."

Together they walked down to the corral, a short distance which they covered side by side and mostly in silence. Bill Heyford threw several forkfuls of new hay to Van's horses, then Van shouldered his blanket roll and they returned to the cabin.

"She ain't singin' around here, anyhow," Heyford observed dryly, as he closed and barred the door. "She was a nice little girl, but I don't want her singin' me to sleep, I tell yuh those."

Grace Balloch Memorial Library
Sp[illegible]h, S. Dak.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A LITTLE PASSAGE AT ARMS

WHILE Van Patten smoothed his blankets in the bunk offered him, Bill Heyford busied himself at little domestic tasks which seemed almost grotesquely inappropriate for a man of his bleak countenance and guarded side glances. He washed his plate and cup, set away the remains of his supper, brought a pail of water from the spring and set it sloshing on the bench beside the door. He whittled shavings from a pine stick and heaped them in a neat little pile on the stove hearth, filled the teakettle and set it on the stove.

Yet Van Patten knew that Heyford was aware of every move Van made, and read swiftly each gesture — just as Van read Heyford's.

With everything ready for morning, Heyford sat down in his homemade chair and pulled off his boots. Van Patten did likewise, sitting on the edge of his made-up bunk.

"What time you want to git up, Van?" Bill inquired.

"Oh, any time, Bill. I ain't particular."

"I been gittin' up kinda early," said Heyford. "I got a few head uh stock runnin' back up in the hills, and I kinda have to keep an eye out for bears an' lions. Damn' things has got two colts a'ready." He slipped his six-shooter from under his waistband and laid it, with the faintest shade of ostentatiousness, on a shelf set low over the head of his bunk.

"Well, I'd like to scout around a little to-morrow." Van Patten unbuckled his gun belt and hung it casually over the back of the homemade chair which stood beside the table, well out of reach from his bunk. "I'd like to find the skunk that got away with my grub, and I want to get myself located soon as possible. Guess I'll apply for a job down at Logan's. I'd like to get a look at the kinda tracks he makes."

"Unh-hnh. I'd feel that way, I guess, if I was in yore place."

Ready for bed, Heyford stood up and glanced from Van's face to the lamp.

"Go ahead and blow it out, Bill. I'm in." Van Patten lifted his feet and slid them under the layer of heavy blankets which Snub Epperson

had obligingly lent him. "Gosh, it feels good to sleep under a roof once more!" And to prove it he wriggled farther under, pulling the blankets to his ears after the habit of men who sleep much in the open. "Good night, Bill."

Heyford's bunk creaked. There was the dry rustle of hay in the mattress. Followed a long sigh that was two-thirds a yawn.

"Good night, Van." Another yawn. "Lord, a feller does git sleepy, ridin' all day in the wind."

"Yeah, you're darn' right." The sentence ended in a yawn and a flop as Van turned over, his own mattress rustling.

It was so still in the cabin that Van could hear the wind whispering in the grove and the faint tapping of branch tips against the window at the side. From the pillow almost touching Van's, Bill Heyford's breathing grew deep and regular. An exhaled breath rippled faintly into a snore, checked midway as if the man approaching the edge of slumber was himself half aroused by the sound. Bill sighed, stirred on the mattress, snored frankly as he finally slipped into oblivion.

Van Patten lay very still, his own breath slowing to a rhythmic vibration inaudible outside the

room yet convincingly close to a snore. Under the floor a cricket began his strident rasping of wings. A nighthawk swooped into the grove. Somewhere out in the basin a horse whinnied.

Van Patten's thoughts shuttled back and forth through the warp of his later experiences, now and then picking up a bright thread of memory and weaving it into the pattern. Again and yet again they went questingly over the story Bill Heyford had told with the unconscious eloquence of simplicity. Almost as if he had been present Van visioned that new grave in the grove, and the distraught woman weeping upon it. The eerie voice that sang "hymn tunes" — what was the answer to that riddle?

In the bunk just beyond his head Bill Heyford moved — yet so faint was the stirring that Van Patten could not have told just how he knew. The hay mattress was not disturbed, the head on the pillow held its position. Yet Van Patten knew that Bill had moved his right arm; that it had reached upward, and that Bill's fingers were groping stealthily for the gun.

Van Patten sighed. The long figure in the next bunk held itself in absolute quiescence. Van

Patten silently drew a hand from beneath the blankets, slid it over his head to the other pillow. With a mental measuring of distance that seemed uncanny, he gently placed the cool muzzle of a gun against Bill Heyford's ear.

Heyford's arm sank to his side. His snoring, that had been a shade too regular, ceased altogether. He lay quiet, scarcely breathing at all.

A little gusty breeze swept the grove, twanging the taut wire that held the stovepipe straight above the roof. The shrill strumming of the cricket went on interminably.

Van Patten reached upward with his other arm, got hold of the gun lying just over Bill's head; lowered it over the side of the bunk and sent it skidding across the floor to where it clinked against a stove leg. The cricket hushed, but the breeze went on whispering through the grove.

Van Patten drew away his hand and the gun it held, tucking it again into the shoulder holster worn under his flannel shirt. He rolled over so that his back was against the wall, heaved another sigh and relaxed. For the first time since Bill Heyford walked into the cabin Van's mind was at ease. For when a man meets an old enemy and

finds him soft-spoken and friendly and hospitable, he had best be on his guard.

But now Van Patten knew exactly how matters stood with him and Bill Heyford. He knew that Heyford had not changed in the last two years; that he counted a man's life cheaper than two good saddle horses and a silver-mounted saddle and bridle, and that he still lacked the honesty of a rattlesnake that will give warning before it strikes.

Van Patten went calmly to sleep, his back to the wall and his right hand under the blanket. But Heyford lay tense and wakeful, silently cursing himself for a fool. He had always known Van Patten was a bad man to monkey with, and now he saw the folly of thinking Van would be guilty of such stupidity as to hang his gun out of reach and lie down unarmed in the dark with any man who dwelt within the Wall.

He would not be tricked by Van Patten's contented snoring, but counted it a pretense. Let him but make a crooked move, he told himself bitterly, and a bullet from Van Patten's gun would go tearing through his brain. Not once did it occur to him that Van had counted on that

very line of thought to safeguard his slumber through the night.

Van Patten knew the outlaw element very well indeed. He knew that any man of Bill Heyford's type always wants better than an even break. Instinctively aware that the eternal law of Justice is against him, the average outlaw cannot bring himself to dare what an honest man will dare. So it was Van Patten who knew that he might sleep in peace, held safe by the other's distrust of him. It was Heyford who lay very still and wakeful in his bunk that night, waiting for the dawn.

Van awoke at daylight, gave a great yawn and raised to an elbow.

"Awake, Bill? My lord, how I did sleep! Didn't keep you awake with my snoring, did I, Hayfoot?"

"Nah. Guess I was pretty busy sawin' through a few knots myself." Bill sat up, yawning prodigiously. "Takes more'n that to keep me awake."

Van Patten eyed him speculatively, wondering if he lied. Now that morning was come he was inclined to belittle the occurrence of last night. But Heyford's ivory-handled six-shooter lay un-

der the stove, and Heyford himself carefully avoided so much as a glance toward it. Proof enough, Van thought, that his intuition had not played him false in the darkness. For none but a guilty man would leave his gun lying ignominiously on the floor where another had thrown it.

Yet this was the only sign that friendliness went no deeper than their teeth. Heyford cooked a breakfast of fried venison and flapjacks, talking meanwhile of whatever came first to mind. Van took his time over his dressing, chatting of men and horses down Paradise way and making it seem quite natural that he should not once turn his back upon his host.

When he buckled his gun belt around his middle, the holster hung well forward; just under his hand, to be exact. But that seemed natural too — unless one glanced first into his eyes. A grim guardian sat there, watchful as an eagle soaring alert above a meadow.

So, with inconsequential gossip of the range, the two sat facing each other across the breakfast table; playing the farce of friendship, with Life the stage manager and Death the penalty if they missed their cue.

They did not miss. When Van Patten picked up the lead rope of the empty-packed Riley and mounted his big sorrel at the corral gate, the sun was peering red-eyed through a gap in the Big Horn mountains across the valley — and Bill Heyford's gun still lay under the cook stove in the cabin.

"Well, so long," called Bill with specious heartiness. "Pull your saddle an' make yourself to home if I ain't here when you ride this way again."

"Thanks, Bill. It sure was a godsend to run across such grub as yours. Hope I'll have a chance to return the favor some day. So long."

He touched Spider lightly with his spurs and turned into the dim trail that led up through the rocky gorge and so, according to Bill, out into the upper end of the valley. As he reached the first buttress of rock (in some secret surprise that he reached it safe and unharmed) he turned and waved a negligent farewell to the man who stood by the corral fence watching him go.

Hayfoot, he told himself with sardonic amusement, would never be caught again with only one gun on his person.

Thinking back over the experience as he rode away from the basin as fast as the horses could manage that rough trail, Van Patten decided that he must henceforth count Hayfoot Bill an enemy who would shoot at sight — in the back if possible. That Bill was one of the Lost Cabin gang he strongly suspected, and that he knew where the brown horse Query might be found he was morally certain.

But a man cannot hope to play a lone hand in the Wall country and quarrel with its inhabitants, as Van Patten well knew. Bill had suspected him from the first of spying for the stockmen outside the Wall, probably — and if that was what had been in Heyford's mind, the incident of the gun was easily understood. No man could live long in the Wall, once he came under the shadow of suspicion that he was a spy. Van Patten had hoped to avoid that stigma.

As a man "on the dodge" he would have been accorded the easy hospitality of the Wall. But Hayfoot had bluntly challenged that story and it was not by his desire than Van Patten rode out from the basin that morning. Bill would make it his business to warn the whole valley, and Van's

life would last just so long as it took some furtive individual to line him up with the sights on a gun.

"Told him I was going to strike this old Pitchfork Logan for a job," he mused. "Guess that's what I better do, because he thinks I was lying when I said I was going to. And furthermore, this man Logan don't stand in with the rest of the Wall. Anyway, that's the best bet right now, and I may find out where my grub went to."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AXES TO GRIND

THE Logan ranch lay along Buffalo Creek (called the river to distinguish it from numerous other small creeks in the valley) and the house sat back at one end of a long grove, glowering at the rocky bluff that frowned down upon it as if Nature herself had nothing in common with the Logans.

A low-browed house with small, dingy windows and doors that never stood open to the sun, and the porch cluttered with stove wood, axes and shovels and a grindstone which Mrs. Logan sat and turned laboriously, using one arm until it seemed about to drop from her shoulder, then hurriedly changing hands until the other arm ached unbearably.

She was at it when Van Patten rode quietly up to the gate and dismounted, and because her back was turned toward the outside world she did not see the intruder approach the house. Neither did

Logan himself, a giant of a man with the face of an ape man and dull, tragic eyes that were now bent upon the sickle he was grinding.

There was no thought for the woman in the way he bore down upon the stone. She had reached the hand-changing point and the gray wheel slowed, jerked into a swift half-revolution, slowed again as her weary fingers slipped from the smooth handle.

"Turn! Consarn ye, what ye stoppin' fer? I ain't half through yit. When I be I'll let ye know. *Turn!*"

"My arms are so tired," whimpered the woman, making a frantic effort to whirl the wheel faster under the heavy pressure put upon it for spite.

"I'll tire ye! *Turn!* Git to work, 'fore I——" He raised an arm, threatening her with the palm of his hand.

"Mary! Mary!" she ducked and fled, screaming. "Mary, don't let your pa strike me!"

The effect upon Logan was peculiar. He turned as if he would rush into the house, but stopped to stare. His eyes were fixed upon a point in the grove in a terrified kind of defiance.

"Come back here! I ain't goin' to hit ye," he

called. "You're crazy as a loon, that's all ails ye. Git back here an' turn this grindstone ——"

It was then that he saw Van Patten coming toward him. For a moment it seemed the presence of a stranger would precipitate further violence, for he lifted the sickle in both hands and stood at bay, his eyes glaring.

"What's all the excitement? I'll turn the grindstone for you," Van called, as he advanced. "It's pretty hard work for a woman, anyway," he added. "I'm looking for work, and some one told me you needed a man." He sat down on the box and began to turn the stone round and round in its trough of muddy water.

The action impelled Logan to lay the sickle upon the whirling gray surface — and Van straightway discovered why Mrs. Logan found it necessary to change hands so often. For Pitchfork Logan bore down heavily with a pressure that never relaxed. Several points were notched and ragged as if the sickle had run afoul rocks. Logan was trying to grind out the nicks.

The woman came slowly back and stood eyeing Van Patten with a curious introspective stare, such as one sometimes sees in the steadfast regard

of a caged lion; as if she saw through him and beyond him into a world peopled with her own strange fancies.

Van's free hand lifted to his hat as he smiled at her in greeting, and the woman's eyes widened in astonishment. But she did not return the salutation. Instead she bent a swift furtive glance to Logan's dour countenance, then turned and went into the house with the stealthy haste of a child fleeing a dark room and not wanting to betray how frightened it is.

Van Patten turned and turned with the steady, driving strength of mechanical power. Like Mrs. Logan, occasionally he found it necessary to change hands on the grindstone handle, but he did not slacken the speed of the stone as she had been forced to do. Logan did not speak, nor did Van, and the sickle took a good half hour to finish.

When it was done Logan stood it against the log wall, scratched his grizzle-bearded chin and picked up the nearest of the two axes. He laid the blade upon the stone and shot a swift glance at Van Patten.

"Turn!" he grunted, and Van forthwith began

the monotonous task of whirling the wheel round and round.

Like the sickle, the ax was dull and nicked and Logan held the blade hard against the stone with a steady pressure that cost Van Patten aching shoulder muscles before it was through. Even then the man was not satisfied with his grinding, but took up the second ax and sharpened it to a dagger edge. Van Patten cast anxious glances here and there and sighed with relief that there was nothing else in sight that properly required sharpening.

"There's hammer an' steeples in that bucket over there. Take your horse an' go fix the fence up river," growled Logan, and shouldered the sickle and strode away, without looking toward Van Patten.

That young man stared after him, watching particularly his cheap, broad-toed shoes. But they were fairly new, with good soles and heels not much worn at the sides. Van followed him slowly for a few yards, looking at the tracks Logan made in the path to the stables, and decided that if Logan was the thief he had changed his old shoes for better ones.

While he stood at the well, windlassing a bucket of fresh water from the cool depths, Mrs. Logan came timidly out from the house with an empty pail in one hand and the other concealed under her apron. Her manner was still furtive and she watched the stables as if she half expected some monster to spring out at her. But Logan had led out his team and was driving them afoot toward the meadow, the freshly ground sickle over his shoulder. Seeing him disappear behind a clump of bushes, Mrs. Logan took heart and came up to Van, eyeing him with her queer intent gaze.

"Something to stay you till supper," she said shyly as a child, and drew a package from under her apron. "He wouldn't ask you to eat, but you're hungry. *I* know. He'll work you, but I'll feed you if you won't tell. If you do I'll poison you — perhaps. They say I poison them ——"

The look in Van Patten's eyes stopped her as if he had laid fingers on her lips. Her own eyes wavered from his. A faint flush stole upon her cheek bones that looked high beneath her sunken eyes.

"Thank you," he said gently, ignoring alto-

gether her last wild sentence. "I was beginning to think about dinner, all right."

He placed the package in the bucket of fence staples, filled her pail with water and carried it into the house. As if she still felt the rebuke of his eyes, Mrs. Logan followed him meekly and in silence.

In sharp contrast with the exterior of the house, inside it was spotless and in order; not in the least as if a crazy woman dwelt there, Van thought, as he set down the water pail and turned to go. The woman herself seemed to feel his thoughts for she stepped before him in sudden boldness.

"I wouldn't poison anybody, young man," she said quietly. "But sometimes I feel as if I'll go crazy enough to do that, or worse. I'd make you a cup of coffee if I dared, but he might take a notion to come back, so you'd better go. I want to tell you not to cross him, for he's terrible when he's wrought up. There's nothing too bad for him to do. Nothing! You won't stay long. You'll be like the rest of them and leave us in the lurch. But while you do stay, don't cross him."

She gave him a searching look and moved aside,

still watching his face as if there was something she hoped to see expressed therein.

"You're strong," she observed, in the tone of one who is weighing a possibility, "but you aren't strong enough, I'm afraid."

Van walked to the door, laid hold of the knob and paused there, stayed by a sudden impulse he could not explain.

"Have you ever seen a brown saddle horse in the Wall with a white question mark between the eyes?"

Pulled back from some thought that obsessed her mind, Mrs. Logan regarded him with that intent, introspective stare which he now saw was habitual with her.

"Ask Hayfoot Bill," she said, and turned away into another room.

Van Patten stood looking after her, half expecting her to return. But when she did not he went out, got the tin bucket by the well, mounted Spider and rode away, with Riley following docilely behind.

It was noon and the horses were hungry, for he had ranged the hills since sunrise. He found the break in the fence, unsaddled and turned the

horses loose to graze in the pasture, and sat down with his back to a tree, the package of food in his lap.

The implication that Hayfoot Bill was the thief who had stolen Query nagged at him. Why hadn't he searched that hidden basin when he first discovered it? Or did Mrs. Logan's meaning go no farther than naming the man most likely to know the answer to his question? Living the isolated life she evidently lived, she could not possibly have any knowledge of the affairs of the men who dwelt in the valley, or of the horses that came and went.

Van came to the conclusion that she had meant exactly what she had said. Ask Hayfoot Bill about the horse, for if any man knew, it would be Hayfoot. Which, Van conceded, was probably the truth so far as it went, and he might act upon it when the time came.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE VOICE IN THE GROVE

THAT night Van Patten became the unwilling participant in a scene which shook him to the middle of his soul and proved to him that Bill Heyford had probably told the exact truth when he related his experience at the Logan ranch.

It came after supper — a meal well-cooked but eaten in the morose silence of mutual distrust. From the time dusk settled in the grove and the lamp was lighted, Van Patten became uncomfortably aware of an atmosphere of expectancy and dread, manifested by Logan in a furtive watching of the window, and a stealthy vigilance directed chiefly toward his wife. The woman seemed to share in the expectancy, but with a fluttering eagerness, a transparent attempt at indifference as rasping to the nerves as was the franker attitude of her husband.

Van Patten, masking any emotion he felt, waited with the others. He was pushing back his chair to rise from the table when it came; a

high young voice from toward the river, plaintively calling, "Mother! Mother! Mother!"

Mrs. Logan was on her feet and starting for the door when her husband sprang up and caught her by the hand, dragging her back by force.

"Seddown!" he commanded, his face working grotesquely. "You ain't goin' out!"

"It's Mary!" she cried distractedly. "Mary wants her mother! Let me go, Jess Logan! I've got to go to Mary!"

"It ain't Mary." Logan hissed the denial under his breath, as if he feared the voice outside would hear. "You're crazy as a loon. Mary's dead." He glanced fearfully toward the window, over which a calico curtain had been drawn when night fell.

"Dead or alive, Mary's my child. She never called like that before — let me go, Jess Logan!"

"Mother! Mother!"

It seemed to Van Patten that the voice was coming nearer. Logan released his wife and staggered to his chair, covering his face with one arm as he cowered there. Mrs. Logan pulled open the door.

"I'm coming, Mary, my child!" she cried, and rushed out into the darkness.

"Don't you go," Logan cried harshly as Van Patten took a step toward the door. "You stay here. She's come up out of the river — like she always does — you stay here!"

As Van stood uncertain and a little repelled, looking down at the terrified old man, the voice in the grove began to sing:

"We shall meet, we shall meet,
We shall meet beyond the river!
We shall meet beyond the river,
Where the surges cease to roll."

High and clear, with a sweetness that held his breath suspended, it came floating to him from the distance just as he had heard it in his dream up there in that blind canyon.

The old man shuddered as he listened, and even Van Patten felt a cold prickling of the scalp as the eeriness of the song bore in upon him. He did not believe in ghosts. He would have smiled in derision at any man who confessed such a weakness. Nevertheless he sat down again in his chair pushed against the wall, and there he stayed, listening and wondering and watching the abject

old man huddled in his chair with an arm thrown up over his face as if he would ward off some formless menace.

The singing ceased, after a while, but Van Patten did not move from his place. Mrs. Logan came in, white and with a strange look in her eyes, like one bewildered after a too vivid dream. Without a glance at her husband she went about her work of clearing away the supper dishes, moving mechanically, her mind wandering far apart from her body.

Van Patten wiped the dishes for her and wished that he might ask her what she had seen out there in the grove. But with the old man sitting slack in his chair, Van felt that the subject must not be mentioned; at least in Logan's presence. His eyes kept returning to Mrs. Logan's bony features, wondering what awful thoughts were prisoned behind that steady, introspective stare.

At dawn he was up and out to the grove, looking for the grave of Mary Logan. It was not hard to find. A beaten path, worn by the feet of a mother whose yearning heart would give her no peace but drove her often to the spot, led Van Patten through tangled thickets to the grave.

It lay on a tiny knoll where the trees were thinnest. Tin cans filled with wild flowers in water stood half buried in the carefully smoothed mound, an even row of them all down the center. Van Patten took off his hat and stood looking at the grave, thinking what tragedy lay buried there. A lonely place for a young girl to lie; a lonely place for a mother to sit and brood over her loss.

In a pitiful attempt to beautify the surroundings the weeds and small bushes had been haggled off with an old scythe that stood leaning against a tree. It was rusty and dull, but by main strength he managed to achieve a smoother cutting before he left the knoll and walked down the little slope to Buffalo Creek.

Hayfoot Bill had said the singing seemed to come up out of the river, and last night old "Pitchfork" Logan had muttered, "She's come up out of the river — like she always does." Even granting the impossible premise that Mary Logan's ghost came and sang at night, just why should it come out of the river, if the girl had been killed by a horse?

On the grassy river bank Van stopped and scanned the farther shore and the trees that grew

along it. Just here the stream was deep and swift, with a fallen tree lying from bank to bank and forming a foot bridge; none too secure, Van decided as he stepped out upon it, for the smaller limbs on the farther bank swayed the trunk treacherously under his weight and he saved himself a ducking by making a long jump to shore.

There, within a few inches of where he landed in the moist sand, were the imprints of square-toed boots, run down at the heel and with the left sole broken so that a ridge lay straight across the track. Van Patten knelt and examined them, got up and stood looking for others. But the coarse grass and tall weeds grew close by, and although these were trodden down in a faint trail, no boot tracks were visible.

He followed the path to rocky ground and returned, looked again at the telltale marks in the sand, shook his head over the puzzle and returned to the house.

The thief of the canyon had been prowling around Logan's place, that was certain. He did not think it was Logan, for now he found himself agreeing with Hayfoot's reasoning. Logan would not leave the house after dark. The man's cower-

ing terror had been too real. His dread of the dead girl's coming had taken hold of him at dusk, and Van Patten felt that it was so every night.

Anxious as he was to find the stolen horse and be gone out of the valley, Van Patten found himself pondering the mystery of this ghostly visitant who was breaking down the sanity of two people. If ghosts ever ate bacon and beans and sour-dough bread, he would have jumped straight to the conclusion that this singer of hymns had robbed him. But in the first place he could not believe in ghosts, and in the second place he could not believe that the singing was some gruesome joke being played upon the Logans. Without ever having heard her in life, Van Patten instinctively knew that no man or woman could mimic a voice like that. The old folks could not be deceived. Without a doubt it was the voice of Mary Logan, and yet — Mary Logan was dead and buried in the grove.

As he stepped upon the porch Mrs. Logan herself came from the corrals carrying two milk buckets foamy full. Van went to meet her and take the buckets, feeling a little ashamed of his negligence. He had supposed that Logan would do

the milking himself, since he had said nothing about the chores. But when Van spoke of it, Mrs. Logan shook her head.

"That was Mary's job," she said simply. "Now she's gone I have to do it. Jess is a hard man, as you'll find it out if you stay here long. He's a driver. He always was, but now he's being drove himself. It's God's justice upon him."

Van said nothing to that and presently she looked at him questioningly.

"Did you hear her sing last night?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer, she went on, "That was my Mary singing. She comes and sings to me. I love to hear her sing, and she does it to comfort me. She did that when my Bennie — went. She's a good girl and she always thinks of her mother."

They had reached the well, and Mrs. Logan signed to him to stop.

"I can talk to you," she said. "You don't think I'm crazy, as the rest of the folks here do. Jess spread that story around when my Bennie — went. Bennie was a good boy, and though Jess drove him day and night, he wouldn't leave his mother and sister to bear the brunt of things

alone. Bennie wasn't that kind of a boy. He never thought of himself, he was always trying to make things easier for his mother and sister." She stopped and looked long and searchingly into Van's face. "Would a boy like that run away from home without a word or a look to let us know he was going?"

It was like Van Patten to give the best of himself always, if he gave at all. Now he studied her description of the boy before he answered soberly.

"No, Mrs. Logan, a boy like that would stick."

"They said — Jess spread it around — that Bennie had run away. He was here in the afternoon, and Jess was in a terrible rage with the boy over something or other — nothing to make a sane man go all to pieces the way Jess did. He sent Bennie to the field, and then he went after him. And when he came back he said the boy had run away and that it was a good riddance, and if he came back we must not let him in.

"It went along till dark, and Bennie didn't come. Mary went to look for him, but Jess brought her back and locked us both in. He was like a maniac. And he's so big and strong — there was nothing we could do — two women

alone here on the ranch, and none of the neighbors friendly or trustable. It's 'Mind your own business,' down here in the Wall, and 'Every fellow for himself, and the devil take the hindmost.' If Jess had been an outsider, they'd have stood by us. But he's a Wall man and that settled it.

"I knew Bennie was dead, but Jess told folks I was crazy because I took on about it. Mary knew he was dead too. She knew Bennie never would run away in this world. But Mary was always quiet and cool and kept things bottled up in her own heart like her father ——"

"Her father? Jess?"

"No, not Jess. Mary was a Parker. Good stock, but when her father died and Mary and Bennie were just little things, I married Jess. He was our foreman, and had a masterful way with him, and — I needed some one to take an interest in things and look after the stock. I've cursed the day I did it, but he wasn't so bad till he began to take what wasn't rightfully his, and throw in with the worst element on the range. It got so bad they were after him for things he'd done, and he moved in here. He's been getting worse ever since, till now ——" She shivered.

"You think he — made away with the boy?" It seemed brutal to put so ugly a thing into speech, but Mrs. Logan seemed past shrinking at mere words.

"I do," she said firmly. "I've always thought so, and Mary did too. But we hadn't a bit of proof, and what could we do? We talked sometimes of leaving the Wall and going off by ourselves, but here was our stock — *my* stock, every bit of it. Jess hadn't a thing but his saddle and what money was in his pocket, when I married him. And that wasn't much," she added contemptuously, "for he gambled every dollar he could get his fingers on.

"Mary was planning to round up our horses and get out with them — but it was a big undertaking for a girl and an old woman that's supposed to be crazy. There were men in here who tried to court her, and Mary was afraid of them all. She wouldn't ask help, and so we had to wait. Mary had to find a way out of the Wall where we wouldn't be likely to be seen. We couldn't go out at the lower end, past Ship Rock. We were afraid the folks on the ranch there might try to hold us back and send for Jess.

"So Mary would slip off and explore the valley up above here. And then — it was six weeks ago yesterday ——"

"Marthy? What you standin' there gabbin' about? You git in here an' git breakfast, you ——" It was Jess Logan, mouthing threats from the porch, working himself into a rage because his wife stood idle in his sight.

The furtive, vacant look dropped like a mask over Mrs. Logan's face. She stooped and would have lifted the milk buckets if Van had not put her gently to one side and taken them up himself. He walked up to the porch with them, old Pitchfork standing there glowering at the two.

"I didn't hire ye to do woman's work!" he began truculently, as Van came up the steps. "You git down there an' feed the horses an' harness 'em, ready to git at that hay! Standin' around chewin' the rag with a crazy woman ——"

"That'll be about enough of that," Van Patten said, flicking him with a cold-eyed glance. "If you can't speak respectfully of your wife, keep your mouth shut. She's got more sense than you have, anyway."

"What's that? What's that? Talk back to

me, will ye? You git off'n this place b'fore I split yer head open!" He whirled and snatched up an ax — one which Van had reason to know was sharp as a battle-ax — and lifted it threateningly.

Logan's eyes held the demon-light of murder. With both hands full, Van Patten could do only one thing to protect himself. He swung a bucket of milk and let Logan have it full in the face.

The unexpectedness of the attack threw Logan off his guard and off his balance so that he stepped backward, caught his heel on the edge of the porch and fell sprawling. The ax flew from his hand and narrowly missed driving through Mrs. Logan's chest. Van set down the other milk bucket and was ready for him when he came up.

But Logan without a weapon and facing a man who was not afraid of him was not the Pitchfork Logan who had terrorized two women and chased from the ranch men of little courage and with nothing much at stake. He clawed at the porch edge and got upon his knees, spluttering at the milk that deluged him. Van's glance fell upon the second sharp ax and he picked it up and sent it whirling toward the woodpile out of Logan's reach.

"Calm down, now, or you'll get the other bucket," he said harshly. "I'll get off the ranch when I'm ready to go, and you'll behave yourself while I'm on it. Feed your own horses," he added, for good measure. "I never hired out to you, remember."

"Then git out, why don't ye?"

"Because I'm not ready to go, that's why," Van retorted, as he carried the remaining bucket of milk into the house.

Mrs. Logan looked at him beseechingly, and he gave her a reassuring smile, though he felt little enough like it.

"No, I'm not going to leave," he said gently. "Not while things stand the way they are. I'm part human, anyway, I hope."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE FOX, THE GOOSE AND THE CORN

Logan went off to the stable, his throttled rage sending him staggering down the trail like a drunken man. Presently Van Patten on the porch heard him hoarsely shouting maledictions at the horses, as if he must vent his spleen on the animals, since he was balked of bullying his wife. Followed the dull impact of blows and the trampling of hoofs, and Van was on the point of going down to put a stop to the needless abuse when Mrs. Logan came to the door with a hand bell such as small country hotels used to call their guests at meal-time. Van reached out and took it from her and with a grim determination began clanging the summons to breakfast.

No man with any normal amount of pride, thought Van, would come to the house and sit at table after the ludicrous affair of half an hour ago. He would starve first. But Pitchfork Logan was not a normal man. He presently emerged from the stable, carrying the pitchfork which gossip

had said was his favorite weapon; but when he saw Van Patten he stopped and stood the fork against the corral gate before he came up the trail. Van grinned at the significance of that action, and turned back into the house to take his place at the table.

All through that meal Logan was like a trapped wolf, sulking until the moment when it dares to spring and sink its fangs into the throat of its captor. He ate voraciously, stoking his big body with salt pork, hot biscuits, fried potatoes and coffee, staring at his plate or sending shifty glances from under his eyebrows toward the food which Van passed to him with punctilious courtesy which served as fuel to the fires of hate, just as Van Patten intended that it should.

"Might just as well bring things to a showdown," he told Mrs. Logan afterwards, when she remonstrated nervously with him for goading Logan to further violence. "No use letting it drag along till some time when it suits him to bust out. Way it is now, he's mad and he knows I know it, but he ain't quite mad enough to call the turn. When he makes up his mind what he wants to do about it, then we'll have it out."

"Oh, you don't know him like I do!" she wailed. "He'll kill us both, just as he killed Bennie and Mary!"

"What's that?" Van Patten whirled on her. "What makes you think he killed the girl?"

Mrs. Logan cast a frightened glance toward the field where Logan had once more gone with the horses. She hesitated, looking at Van with tragic eyes that seemed trying to read his most secret thoughts.

"I don't know who you are or where you come from," she said finally, "but you ain't like the rest of these Wall boys, and seems like the Lord sent you in the nick of time. A little more of this and I'd be as crazy as he always tries to make out to folks. Why," she cried bitterly, "I've heard him calling me 'that crazy old woman of mine' more'n once, right to my face almost. I guess I was going crazy over it all — I've caught myself screaming and crying in the grove ——"

"Yeah, but what about the girl? If you want to tell me, I mean."

"He killed her. That's what's preying on his mind, I believe."

"How?"

" I don't know how, any more than I know how he killed Bennie. I know he done it, from the way he acted afterwards. Pushed me into my room so hard I fell over a chair, locked me in — and I didn't know what it was all for! I didn't even know she was dead! And then I heard him pounding and sawing, over in the tool shed. I knew something was wrong — I felt it, just as plain as if something told me. I called Mary and called her — it was time for Mary to come, and she didn't ——"

Van felt like an inquisitor, but his intuition told him that the woman would be better for telling what had been crushed deep into her heart through fear. He shrank from the sight and sound of her sobbing, and had her peril been less real he would have fled the place. As it was he stood staring out through the window, trying to smoke a cigarette, but when it had gone out three times he threw it away and turned to lay an awkwardly comforting hand on her shoulder.

" He was nailing her in her coffin," she went on tonelessly, roused by his touch. " I didn't know till he had come back from telling some of the neighbors down the river. Then he come and let

me out and said, says he, 'Mary got throwed off that black horse an' killed. No use takin' on over it,' he said; 'it's done an' can't be helped. The funeral's to-morrow — I've sent out word.'

"I don't know — I guess I was crazy that night, and maybe afterwards for a while. I know I wanted to see her and he wouldn't let me. He said she was disfigured — smashed up, he put it. I expect I said some wild things — I know he kept me in the house, locked in the bedroom most of the time — I don't know how long. But I come of good sturdy stock, that went through some pretty horrible times pioneering and fighting Indians. Some of my folks has been massacred — but nobody in the family ever went crazy over it, that I ever heard of. So I got over wanting to kill Jess and myself, and things has been going along ——

"That was when Mary commenced to sing some of her old songs in the grove at night. Now I know she's watching over me and trying to comfort me, like she always used to, and it ain't near as lonesome as it was. I dunno — sometimes I feel as if maybe it's best she's gone. She's where he can't get at her with his terrible temper, and

I know she must be happy, or she wouldn't sing. Do you think she would?"

She was looking straight at Van Patten now, and that young man suddenly found the faith to answer her on a point that heretofore had been hazy in his mind.

"I heard the singing myself, last night," he said gently. "It sure didn't sound like she was miserable. I guess she must be happy, all right." He hadn't the heart to shake her faith in the supernatural by casting any doubt on the identity of the singer.

"Jess has been like a crazy man himself since she started singing," Mrs. Logan remarked, with something close to satisfaction in her voice. "I know as well as I'm setting here that he thinks she's come back to haunt him. Maybe she has. It's God's judgment on him and I can't feel a mite of pity for him, the way he's abused us all. I only wish I was laying beside my girl. We'd be together then, the three of us, and I'd be out of my misery. I expect," she added resignedly, "he'll kill me some day, and that will be the end of the Parkers."

A wave of indignation swept Van Patten. He

went out and stood on the porch, wondering just what he should do to help the woman.

At once he thought of Lea. She would be glad to have Mrs. Logan with her, but he could not go back without Query, nor could he leave Mrs. Logan here while he went to look for the horse. Her life was not safe, after what had happened that morning; nor was his, for that matter, though he scarcely gave his own danger a thought.

Even supposing he had found Query, he could not bring himself to favor the idea of taking the old lady out of the valley and leaving Logan in possession of everything she owned. That would be on a par with Ches Baker's theft of Lea's herd. He would have to find some way of getting her horses, at least, and taking them along. Perhaps she could sell what cattle she owned.

Then there was the deputy, Walt Pearson of Paradise. Van did not believe that Pearson would venture into the Wall alone unless, like himself, he was sufficiently well known to be fairly safe. If he really had come into the valley, he would be eager to take Van out with him and back to Paradise. It would be a strong card to play at the next election, where personal prowess

might be counted on to win the lukewarm voters to Walt. Furthermore, there was undoubtedly a personal grudge to settle, for Van had struck a vicious blow with that king-pin. He gave a short laugh as he enumerated the various elements which he must somehow assemble without injury to himself.

"What you laughing at, young man?" Mrs. Logan was peering out at him from the doorway. "I've heard more curses and crying than I have laughing in the last ten years. What's funny?"

"Oh, I was thinking of an old puzzle that somebody sprung on me about the fox, the goose and the corn. Ever hear it?"

"No, I ain't had much time or thought for puzzles," she said wanly. "My head's been so full of my own troubles and trying to work them out. What about the fox and the corn?"

"Don't forget the goose," Van grinned. "Well, it's like this: A farmer was walking through the country, and he was carrying a fox, a goose and some shelled corn. He came to a river, and he had to figure out a way to get across with his load — he could only carry one over at a time.

If he took the corn first, the fox would eat his goose while he was gone. If he took the fox, the goose would eat the corn. If he took the goose, the fox and the corn would be all right till he made the third trip, but either the fox would eat the goose while he went back after the corn, or the goose would eat the corn while he went back after the fox."

"Well!" said Mrs. Logan after a minute. "I don't know what the answer is, but I guess I know how the poor man felt."

"Yeah," Van laughed again. "That's what I was laughing about. I'm in the same fix that jasper was in."

"It ain't funny, far as I can see," she persisted. "And now you've got a chance to work on a puzzle of your own, young man. There's a big storm coming up, and Jess can't put up no hay in the rain. He'll be coming in, pretty quick, and he's in one of his terrible tempers over what you done to him with that bucket of milk. I don't want to see any more trouble on this ranch, so I guess you better saddle up and take to the brush. More I think of it, the more I see there's bound to be trouble. Killin', maybe. I guess you better get

away before he comes. You've been good to me——"

Van shook his head, smiling back at her as he started for the stable.

"I'm not going very far, but don't worry," he said. "I've seen bad-tempered old men before."

She stood watching him wistfully, perhaps wishing that he had come before, when there was Bennie, and then Mary to save; wishing also that, since he had not come sooner, he would go before some other terrible thing happened. She looked very frail and worn and apprehensive, standing there in her faded calico dress and her patched gingham apron, with her graying hair, wavy on the temples, drawn back into a knot, and her fingers clutching nervously at the rough door casing.

Van Patten looked back again, waved a hand and disappeared around the corner of the stable, returning in a moment with his rope coiled over his arm.

"Just happened to think," he carelessly explained. "If it storms I don't want my rope to get wet, so I thought I'd bring it into the house."

She stood back to let him in, her eyes puzzled.

"He'll be coming in right away now," she uneasily persisted. "You're awful kind, but I wish you'd go."

"I can't go." He frowned, disliking to argue with her. "I couldn't leave you here, and there's no place where I could take you; not right now. There's something I must do before I leave the valley; a horse I must find. He was stolen, and I've got to take him back to his owner. And I can't leave you here, Mrs. Logan. If you know any place in the valley where you'd be safe, I'll take you there."

She had been staring at the greenish black clouds rolling ominously back upon themselves as they pushed farther and farther over the Wall. Now she turned to him with a bitter smile.

"You could hunt your horse nights, young man. I'm safe enough at night — over in the grove by Mary's grave."

In spite of himself Van shivered a little, but her attention was drawn again to the approaching storm as if the heaving thunderheads brought the spell of a world far removed from the Wall. Van looked at her and wondered if she were thinking of that far-off heaven where her children were

supposed to be waiting for her. But when she spoke he saw how wide his guess had been.

"Many's the time I've called on the Lord to strike Jess Logan down with lightning," she said, "and every time I see a storm coming I wait to see if He's going to answer my prayers. Mary used to say it was wicked to ask the Lord to take out our grudges on folks, but He punished the blasphemers in olden times and I can't see any reason why He can't do it yet. And He will, in His own good time. Look at them bolts of lightning slashing the clouds like swords! Just a touch of one would send Jess Logan in the wink of an eye to face his Maker!"

"It sure does look as if the Lord will only stand so much from a man," Van said soberly, thinking of Ches Baker and the retribution visited upon him. "But it takes a blamed long while sometimes. And in the meantime innocent folks get the worst of it. You better go back in the house. She'll be a fright when she breaks — and the wind's going to be fierce. If there's any windows up they better be put down. Looks like hail, to me."

The muttering of the thunder had increased to

a roar, with frequent sharp claps following closer and closer upon the lightning. Van thought of the horses, standing unprotected in a small pole corral. If it hailed as he had seen it do in that country, they would be pelted unmercifully. He pulled his hat lower on his head and started at a run for the corral.

The stable, facing the storm with its wide cracks and the great door off its hinges, offered poor shelter if the wind blew hard. Van opened the corral gate and whistled to Spider, caught him by the mane as he came up, swung on to his back and started for a small shed that stood half hidden in the grove. Whatever the shed might be used for, he would make room for the two horses, he thought, as he looked over his shoulder to make sure that Riley was coming.

A sinister stillness was on the whole valley as he dismounted at the shed door. Over the rim rock that formed the Wall the clouds came tumbling, laced with darting, zigzag lance thrusts of brilliant white flame. The cannonade of the thunder reverberated from the high peaks of the Big Horns like a hidden entrenchment of big guns on a battle front. But there on the valley floor

the very leaves on the trees seemed to poise and listen. Under a bush beside the shed door two little brown birds stood huddled, waiting the onslaught of the tempest, afraid to move even when Van stepped within three feet of them.

The shed door was closed and latched. As Van pulled it open he stopped short, eyeing askance the dismal place. It was here that Pitchfork Logan had hammered and sawed in secret, that terrible afternoon when he had locked his wife in the bedroom. It was here that the dead girl had been securely nailed inside her crude coffin before Logan went to notify the nearest neighbors of her death. Board ends and sawdust told the story, and the two sawhorses that still stood just the right distance apart to support a coffin. In the instant of hesitation he pictured the scene all too vividly.

But the storm cared little for human affairs. There came a blinding glare, an ear-splitting crash and the smell of brimstone. The horses crouched toward each other and lunged forward, fearfully eager for shelter. To save himself from going down, Van Patten threw himself into the room, kicking a sawhorse aside as he went. The

horses crowded in the doorway until Spider claimed right of way by lifting his heels against Riley's ribs, as he plunged ahead.

Van turned and quieted them with sharp words and Spider came in followed by the indignant Riley, who was not too scared to take a spiteful nip at the sleek sorrel's rump. A tree crashed down somewhere in the grove, struck by the lightning that darted earthward before the gale swept into the breathless zone in the path of the storm. At any instant now the storm would break.

Van thought of the frail old lady at the house, whose own troubles, great as they were, could not crowd out of mind her solicitude for a stranger who had been kind to her. Logan might have returned — anything might have happened in Van's absence, brief as it was. He rushed out, fastened the door shut and raced the storm to the house. As he pulled open the door a blast struck it and tore it out of his hands. It took all his strength to force the door shut against the gale. A livid dusk settled upon the valley, to be rent asunder constantly by the lightning. Hailstones like pigeons' eggs battered the house. The grove writhed in the tumult.

"Jess!" screamed Mrs. Logan, pointing toward the field and trying to make herself heard above the din of hailstones and thunder. "He didn't come — the Lord's maybe seen fit to punish him!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

"JESS KNOWS WHAT WAS BURIED IN THAT GRAVE!"

For half an hour the hail drove down upon the valley, and when the lumps of ice ceased falling a deluge of rain loosed itself in sheets of water pushed aslant by the tempest. In the grove the trees whipped and bent like bamboo rods in the blast, tearing loose branches which the wind caught and carried away. The shake roof leaked in a dozen places and Van Patten was kept busy pulling beds out from under the drip, or setting pans and buckets to catch the water where it came through in streams.

Logan did not come. Mrs. Logan stood by the window looking down toward the field, her face sternly repressing her hope that he never would come again, and Van was tempted to join in that hope; though he did not look upon Logan with the abject terror which Logan inspired in his wife.

When the storm settled to a steady downpour and the electrical orgy seemed to have swept on

to the foot of the valley, there to rumble among the hills, hunger drove Van Patten to look at his watch. It was past noon and Mrs. Logan, oblivious to the passage of time, was still watching strainedly for Jess to appear. Van went across and touched her on the arm.

"I'm going down to feed my horses," he said, raising his voice above the drumming of the rain. "Don't you feel like eating? It's close to one o'clock. Cup of hot coffee will do you good." He turned away, then stopped irresolutely.

Her fear of Jess Logan troubled him, just as the thought of Lea Baker left alone so far from neighbors clouded the back of his mind with worry. Waking or sleeping, there was the nagging urgency of completing his mission in haste and getting back to the LM ranch to make sure Lea and the little girl were safe.

In like manner he found himself worrying over the frail little old lady by the window, watching with tragic intensity lest her husband return and kill her as he had so often threatened to and as she believed he had murdered her children. He hated to leave her alone in the house even for the short time he would be gone, yet the well-being of

his horses might mean just the difference between life and death to him — perhaps to her also.

"Say, have you a gun?"

She looked at him and shook her head.

"Do you think for one minute that Jess Logan would leave a gun where I could get my hands on it — or poison?"

"Could you use one if you had it?"

This brought a cynical smile to her lips.

"I told you my folks was pioneer in this country," she retorted with some impatience. "I learnt to ride and shoot before I could say my a, b, c's." And she added meaningly, "Jess don't forgit it, either! He sees to it there ain't a horse or a gun I can get my hands on. That one team is all he keeps up, and he keeps an eye on them."

Van's eyes lighted. If she could shoot and ride, he could see his way clear, give him a little time.

"Well," he said, "here's a gun that might come handy while I'm gone. I won't be long, though." He gave her the gun which had tamed Bill Heyford. "You ain't liable to need it," he assured her. "It's just to make you feel safe. You'll feel better if you have something hot to eat."

To further encourage her toward her housewifely duties he waited long enough to start a fire in the cookstove and put on the teakettle. Mrs. Logan slipped the gun inside the belt of her apron and turned to the cupboard as he pulled open the door. Sturdy stock, she had called herself, and Van grinned a little to himself at her efficient range method of disposing of her weapon. He was not afraid now that she would be unable to protect herself, and it struck him that he would not want to stand in Pitchfork Logan's brogans when he faced that little old lady.

As he left the house he saw that he would never be able to carry hay on a fork in that wind; nor did he want to turn the horses out in the storm. So he battled his way to the cabin where he had slept the night before, got his tarp and managed to fill it with hay. It would have been impossible to face the storm with the unwieldy bundle on his back, but since the wind was behind him he was propelled forward at a trot, drenched to the skin before he had gone ten rods.

He brought up at the door of the shed, where he halted abruptly, staring at the wet earth beside the building. There were the tracks of

broad, square-toed shoes, and across the ball of one lay a tiny ridge where the sole was broken.

Even while he stood staring down at it the rain beat and blurred the imprints until they might have been any man's tracks. They must have been freshly made, to stand out so clearly when he first glimpsed them; less than five minutes ago, judging from the way the storm obliterated them.

The robber of his camp was inside the shed — but so were Spider and Riley, and they wanted hay. Van Patten considered the situation, shifting the load so that he gripped the canvas with his left hand. He listened, then cautiously unlatched the door, drew his gun and entered, crouching low behind the big bundle.

Nothing happened, except that the horses nickered hungrily and began to bunt the tarp with their noses and to snatch greedily at protruding wisps of hay.

Van stood still. He was in an awkward position, and he realized the fact. He was also puzzled. He knew that the fellow with the broken shoe was inside that shed with him, for the tracks lay close to the door, and there was no other

means of getting in or out. A high, narrow window too small for a man to pass through let in blown showers of rain.

Probably the fellow was waiting for Van to show himself before he shot. The horses were crowding impatiently against the tarp, and to protect them when the shooting began, he did the only thing he could think of at the time — he threw the bundle open at their feet and ducked past their heads and into the corner.

The immediate, tangible result was that he barked his shin on one of the sawhorses and swore promptly and viciously. Nothing else happened. Van set his shoulders against the two angles of the walls and turned his eyes this way and that, searching the gloom of the little place. So, in the opposite corner, he saw a bundle of old quilts twitch over a huddled form beneath.

"Come outa that!" he said grimly. "I got you covered. Stand up."

A figure detached itself slowly from the heap and stood up. Van's eyes narrowed, peering intently. A very slight figure it was; not at all what he expected to see.

They stared fixedly at each other, past the

lowered heads of the horses, feeding indifferent to the human drama being played close beside them.

"Well, who the hell are you?" Van demanded at length. "What are you doing here?"

"I — was waiting. I'm — not hurting anything, am I?"

"What're you waiting for? Who are you, anyway? What do you want?"

"Is Jess in the house?"

"No," said Van. "If you want to see him you're outa luck."

"I don't. I was afraid he might be back. The storm was so bad — and he was on horseback. I was afraid I might be too late, but I guess he stayed up at McBride's or some place. You must be the spy from outside that he wants killed, so I better tell you — I'm Mary Parker."

"Hunh?" The sound was jolted out of Van.

"I want to see mother, but I'm afraid of scaring her too much. It's — it's pretty hard to come back to life when you're supposed to be dead and buried, and I was afraid Jess would suspect the truth before mother realized. And there isn't much time, because they're coming to-night, I

guess, unless the storm holds them up. The Wall doesn't like spies."

Rapidly as she spoke, her words were clean-cut like her mother's. Her eyes were the same except that they were younger and more luminous, and her mouth had the red curve of youth.

Van's reactions were swift as her speech. He was still bewildered, but he could at least grasp the fact that Mary Parker was not dead, as had been supposed. He put away his gun and came out of the corner, wading through wet hay as he crossed to where she stood shivering a little in her wet overalls and ragged shirt.

"Here. Wrap that quilt around you, and tell me about it."

At the change in his tone she smiled a little and looked up into his face with much the same unquestioning faith in his friendliness which little Marylee had shown when he rescued her from the bull.

"Jess tried to drown me," she said, cutting straight to the heart of the mystery. "It was when the river was up, and he pushed me in and I thought I was a goner. But I got to shore and hid under a shelving place in the bank while he

tramped up and down looking for me — with a rock in each hand! " she added bitterly.

" You can't blame me for staying dead, even to mother, especially after he had made a coffin and said I was in it, and had a funeral and buried it. He knew I'd be missed, I suppose, and he couldn't find my body, so I guess he put in rocks or something to make it heavy. It sounds crazy, but then that's what he is. I've been afraid he'd kill mother, but I guess the killing fit hasn't taken him since I roused it.

" So I've been on the dodge, as much as any outlaw in the country. I knew a place to hide, back here in the hills, and I wouldn't show myself except at night. Then I'd generally come down to see that mother was all right. I'd sing to her. It made her feel better, even if she did think I was a ghost. And it worried Jess — I hope! "

" It sure did," Van affirmed with a short laugh. " He won't put his nose outside after dark. I saw him last night, scared to death when you commenced to sing."

" Well, nothing would suit me better than to scare him to death! " she returned viciously. " But I was really watching for a chance to let

mother know I'm alive. I was afraid to be too sudden — she's excitable. And besides, I had to remember that Jess knows I never was buried in that grave. I've watched him ride up and down both banks of the river, below here, looking for my body. He's never found it, and he's afraid somebody else might run across it, and it wouldn't take much to convince him I'd got away. Once he suspects that, he'll hunt me down and shoot me like — like an animal!"

"Yeah, he would, all right," Van agreed. "I don't blame you for laying low."

"I didn't have a thing I could kill him with," she explained with terrible simplicity. "I'd have to come within reach of him — and he could break my back with one hand! I did think of going to some of the neighbors, but — there's reasons why I didn't dare. I'd rather stay in the hills than chance it."

"Yeah, I get you," Van Patten said grimly, glancing down at her slim little person. There might be such a thing as chivalry among the outlaws of the Wall, but he would not advise any friendless girl to put it to the test in secret, as Mary Parker would have been obliged to do.

"I've been trying to find some way of getting mother and the team, and going out of the Wall," she went on. "I knew there was a pack trail at the upper end, and I've explored the hills and canyons up above here, to find the quickest and easiest way for mother. I was going to take the team some night — we could ride them. And I had a scheme some way of getting enough grub. But I was lucky in that respect. The other night I found a fellow camped, up in the canyon, and he had a lot of stuff. I took all of it while he was asleep. Of course I know it was stealing, but I had to do it so mother wouldn't go hungry. Anyway, I expect he was an outlaw and can steal more."

"Yeah," said Van, "I expect he'd make out somehow."

"I was going to a place where I cached the stuff, this morning," she continued, "and I heard some one coming on horseback as fast as he could ride. I hid, and in a few minutes here came another man from the other direction. He was a fellow they call Hayfoot. He jumped his horse into the brush right close to me. by the other side of some rocks, and waited there, leaning over

the saddle horn with his gun ready to shoot whoever was coming.

" But it was Jess, coming on our horse Dandy. So Hayfoot rode out in the trail then, and stopped him and asked him what was the matter. Jess said a spy for the stockmen outside was at our ranch, and he was out to warn the Wall. He said he'd get the fellow himself, but he thought the Wall ought to know about it first. Hayfoot said he'd done the right thing and the Wall wouldn't forget it, and they talked quite a while about a bunch coming to-night and lynching you after they'd made you tell about who sent you and everything.

" Then Jess said mother had gone raving crazy and he didn't know what to do with her any more, for she's dangerous and might kill somebody, and they talked about that. Hayfoot said he hated to advise anybody about a thing like that, especially a woman. But he said he knew what he'd be pretty apt to do if he was in Jess' place. Jess asked him what, and Hayfoot laughed and said, 'Why don't you shut her up? You must have a place that'll hold her.' But that wasn't what he meant he'd do, and Jess gave him a queer look

and said he guessed he'd have to, she was getting so bad.

" By that time the storm was coming up so fast they thought they'd better hunt shelter, so they rode back up the valley. I wanted to hurry right down and warn you, but I couldn't on account of the storm. I crawled under the rocks right where I was, and stayed there till it stopped hailing. Then I started down here. But I had to face it most of the way, and it made slow going. I was afraid Jess had come back, so I came here to get out of the rain and rest, and maybe wait for dark.

" I thought if I couldn't get a chance to tell you I'd play ghost when they came, and maybe scare them away. But now you can tell mother, and we can get away from here before they come. I know the way out of the Wall now, by the upper trail."

Her teeth were chattering with the cold from her wet clothes; perhaps, too, from insufficient food, Van thought, as he looked at her. But her intrepid spirit shone through her eyes upraised to his, and he thought of that frail little lady in the house with a six-shooter tucked under the belt of her apron.

"You better come along and tell her yourself," he said, suddenly aware of a great psychological truth. "Them wet clothes will keep her so busy finding dry things for you that she won't have time to have hysterics. Come on — she's pioneer stock and you can't faze her."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"THERE'S THREE OF US — AND ONLY TWO GUNS!"

"WE'VE got to get out of the Wall before they come," Mary Parker insisted, her determined little chin tilted to a stubborn angle. In dry clothes of her own which her mother had joyfully unpacked from the old trunk where they had been folded away with tears as something sacred, Mary was a pretty girl of sixteen or so, tanned a fine shade of brown and alert as a self-reliant young sparrow.

"I sha'n't stir a step from this place till I get a shot at Jess Logan!" her mother contended, all her pioneer blood heated to the battle point over the outrage he had perpetrated. "If the Lord ain't going to punish him, I shall! I've stood all I'm going to — from him or anybody else. Mr. Patten, you can take Mary where she'll be safe, but you ain't going to get me out of this house till I'm ready to go, so there now!"

"I can't leave the valley very far till I find that

horse I came after," Van contributed to the argument, "but I'll see you folks in the clear and then come back. I'd like to take you down near the Colorado line, to a little woman who'd love to have you stay with her. She's had trouble, same as you have. She'd understand. She's all alone on the ranch ——"

"That's all very well," Mary interrupted, "but in the meantime that bunch will be here, and nobody will go anywhere if they catch us here. There'll be a dozen of them, probably. There's three of us — and only two guns!"

"We got the Lord on our side, Mary," her mother reminded her. "Look at David! He only had a sling shot and no gun at all, but he stood right up to a giant and the Lord helped him out."

"David had to; we don't. Mother, don't you realize what those men mean to do? It isn't myself I'm thinking of. I can slip out and get up in the hills. But I wish you'd come up to my hideout — both of you, before they get here. What's the use of waiting?"

"It's going to be a nasty, drizzling night, and I ain't going out in it. Everything's sopping wet."

Mary sighed and gave up the argument, her eyes very tender as she regarded her indomitable mother.

"Well, I can't carry you, and I don't suppose Mr. Patten wants the job, so I suppose we'll stay and fight it out."

Van turned from the window and smiled down at her hearteningly, though the prospect was little enough to his liking.

"I've carried my saddle to the shed, and an old side saddle I found. If you have to pull out, you two can slip through the grove and get away on my horses. They're both gentle, and you know the country."

"But why won't you go?" When she looked at one steadily, Mary's eyes had a curious trick of widening which made her seem very childlike.

"I will — when I'm through here."

She did not ask him what it was he had to do first, for she thought she knew well enough. Her troubled eyes turned from Van to her mother, and in a moment her arms were around the thin shoulders and she was patting her cheek.

"I guess I've learned to be cowardly, sneaking around behind bushes and rocks so much," she

yielded whimsically. "I'll stay, Mother. It isn't very easy to run, and I can't blame either of you."

They would have sat in darkness when the night closed down, but Van advised them to light the lamp and appear as unsuspecting as possible, but to keep away from the windows. Mary he politely ordered into her old bedroom.

"We might need a ghost around here after a while," he grinned, "if they come. Even Hayfoot Bill don't like the sound of your singing; not after dark, anyway. Your mother might go in and stay with you for company. Lie down and rest while you can, both of you. If anything breaks loose, you'll know it quick enough."

They made no objection to that, and after they were gone Van pulled a rocking chair into a corner facing the door and sat down to wait. He did not believe that they would come. It would not be like the Wall, he thought, to ride up boldly to a house and attempt to drag out the man they meant to kill.

Furthermore, this particular ranch was not popular with Wall folk, especially after dark; this drizzly storm would not add to its attractiveness,

he thought. Even Bill Heyford would shy at the grove to-night — and as for Jess Logan, Van felt perfectly sure of what Logan would do.

But for the women's sake he must take every precaution against a surprise. Too well he knew how suddenly the unexpected element will creep into a situation which has promised nothing whatever out of the ordinary. He did not believe that they would come, but he must be prepared in case they did.

He waited a while longer. When the rain continued to patter against the window and trickle from the eaves he left his post, found an old slicker which he put on and went out through the window of the darkened bedroom next to Mary's.

In a little while he returned as he had gone, and he had with him a bundle which he placed in the middle of the floor. Moving on his tiptoes lest he waken the women in the next room, he locked the door, hung an old shawl over the bedroom window and brought in the lamp. After that he was busy for an hour or so, going about the house with his boots off.

At last he went stealthily out on the porch and

was busy there in the dark for a few minutes, returning as quietly as a thief. It was now close to midnight and though the rain had nearly ceased the clouds hung low over the Wall. In the grove behind the house the sodden branches of the cottonwoods swayed and whispered together eerily, with a drip, drip, drip like ghostly footsteps moving aimlessly here and there under the trees.

Feeling fairly well satisfied with his preparations, Van lay down on the bed with his gun ready to his hand. If the Wall gang came he would hear them. If they did not come, then all was well for the present at least. As he had done in the cabin of Bill Heyford, Van went calmly to sleep, feeling sure that he had correctly guessed the other fellow's reasoning, for that night at least. As for the morning, that would be another day with its own particular problems. Whatever they might be he would meet them as they presented themselves.

In that thought lay a measure of tranquillity, so that he slept at ease and dreamed of riding forth on Query to inspect his own fat beef herd. Marylee rode proudly alongside him on her "wittle pony," and he knew that as he turned home-

ward some one would be riding forth singing to meet them.

A wonderful dream it was, and it heartened him for what lay before him on the morrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"I'M A PATIENT WOMAN — BUT I'LL SHOOT HIM ON SIGHT!"

MORNING broke over a battered but clean-washed valley, the meadows beaten flat under the hail that still showed in small drifts of ice lumps in sheltered nooks where they had bounced out of the way of the rain. The leaves on the trees were slit and ragged, and torn branches strewed the grove. But the late stars paled in a sky of clear indigo blue against which the mountain peaks on one side of the valley and the rim of the Wall on the other stood clean-cut with every line and hollow emerging from the night shadows as dawn advanced to full day.

In the gray light just preceding sunrise a rifle barrel slid forward over a rock that crowned a little rise beyond the stable where the bushes grew thin among the scattered trees. From farther along the low ridge other rifles appeared, all looking toward the ranch buildings, more particularly watching the squalid little bunk house and the

house which sat gloomily regarding the stable and corrals from the edge of the cottonwood grove.

On the porch of the house, in the growing light a figure was revealed standing close beside a log post and apparently looking toward the stable. As the light strengthened, Van Patten's coat and light gray range hat were plainly recognizable.

A succession of rifle shots crashed through the cool morning, and the figure on the porch toppled sidewise, swayed a moment and went down slackly, lying asprawl on the soggy old boards of the porch floor.

This was the kind of warfare most favored by the Wall — the kind Van Patten had expected. Since the first hint of daylight he had been watching that little ridge, guessing that it would be chosen as the most natural point of vantage for the purpose.

Now he eyed the prone figure critically and decided that it would fool anybody into thinking it a dead man. The hat, he observed through the window, had two smudgy round holes through the crown. Where the other bullets had landed he could only guess, but it was pretty straight shooting, he knew — and there had been four shots.

He grinned at that delicate compliment paid him by the Wall. They had wanted to make sure of him, it seemed.

Evidently they felt very sure indeed, for presently the marksmen began to show themselves on the ridge. While Van watched them they conferred together, then came trooping down toward the house: Pitchfork Logan, Hayfoot Bill and two others whom Van did not recognize at the moment.

"They're coming down to set on the remains," Van told Mary and her mother, who had come out, looking frightened at the shooting. "Don't be scared — this ain't going to be half as bad as it looks. Tell me who them two are with Hayfoot and Jess. Do you know 'em?"

Mary looked out cautiously, her eyes bright and hard.

"Yes," she said, drawing back. "The tall one is Kid McBride and the other one is Slim Jeffrey. They used to come here — to see me. Jess drove them off the ranch and told them never to come back."

"Good enough. They're going to get their horses. They'll have more nerve when they get

straddle of a horse, I guess. Feel equal to handling Mrs. Logan then, maybe. Don't you be scared," he urged her, smiling cheerfully. "They ain't going to hurt anybody in this outfit."

"We ought to have gone last night," Mary Parker returned to the argument. "We could have got away in the dark, and the rain would wash out our tracks. Now it's too late."

Van Patten did not answer, except to give her a brief, reassuring smile which heartened her more than speech would have done.

Mrs. Logan herself did not seem to need encouragement. Her warlike mood had lasted overnight, apparently, for she fingered the gun Van had given her and watched her husband's approach with a glitter in her eyes that spelled trouble. Van gave her a keen look and decided that the pioneer blood might be trusted, so far as she was concerned. Mary, too, was evidently anxious chiefly for her mother and would rise valiantly enough to deal with whatever emergency might arise.

"My hay man looks large as life and twice as natural," he boasted, giving it another inspection while he kept one eye on the enemy. "Maybe

they're going to let it go at that and ride on home; I sure hope not, though."

"Why?" Mary's birdlike glance steadied while she regarded him curiously. "If they think you're dead we can go on out of the Wall, and we won't be bothered. They won't go looking for mother."

"But I can't leave the Wall till I get the horse I came after," Van patiently explained. "These fellows will maybe know something about him; your mother told me to ask Hayfoot, and I'm going to do it if he comes within talking distance."

"You'd risk your life for one horse?" She was still watching him with that intent look which reminded him of an inquisitive bird.

"This is a special kind of horse," Van evaded, the blood seeping up into his tanned cheeks. "And I made a special kind of promise to get him." He hesitated, looking at her. "You and your mother will be safe enough, whether I am or not," he said. "Two of those fellows like you, and when they hear what Logan did they'll take a hand, I expect. Hayfoot will take your part too, so you've got nothing to worry about."

She gave him an odd look and turned away to

throw her arm around her mother's shoulder. But Mrs. Logan moved aside.

"Don't crowd up on a person's gun side, Mary, when there's trouble brewing," she admonished. "Here they come, and Mr. Patten's right; them fellows won't hurt us — nor Jess either, if I can get one shot at him!"

Van Patten gave a short laugh which checked abruptly as the riders came up and dismounted near the house.

Riding in the lead came Bill Heyford, and the shiny brown horse stepping daintily in the rain-soaked trail, his head up and watching this way and that, was Query. The question mark in his forehead was perfect, as if a man skilled in mechanical drawing had carefully lined it there in white fairly between the full, lustrous eyes.

It was the first time Van had seen him in daylight, and now he caught his lip between his teeth as he gazed. No wonder Lea had chosen that horse among all the herd for her own saddle horse! From his trimly shaped hoofs and slim, sloping pasterns that marked the springy easy-gaited saddle horse, to his proudly arched neck, deep chest and his broad intelligent face, he was perfect.

Van Patten, lover of good horses, threw back his shoulders with an unconscious movement. His throat contracted a bit as he thought of Lea, crying herself into a headache over the loss of this prince among horses.

Now he knew beyond all doubt that he would never leave the Wall while Query stayed within it. Risk his life for a horse? He would have done it — for Lea Baker. He would do it now for sake of Query alone. And, he mentally added, he was very likely to be called upon to do that very thing, since it was Bill Heyford himself who rode him. Bill knew a good horse when he saw him.

The four dismounted near the house, Heyford dropping the reins to the ground while Query stood quiet but on the alert, his eyes taking in everything that moved in that vicinity. The men walked close-bunched up the soggy path, their eyes on the dummy figure lying inert upon the porch.

Even at close range the effigy looked very human, for Van had taken some pains with its manufacture, clothing it with boots and gloves and arranging the posture so that it would fall on its face. The raiders walked with drawn guns, proof

that they did not suspect the trick. Within fifty feet of the porch Logan raised his gun and deliberately fired a shot into the figure, as if he were frightened enough to want to make sure his enemy was dead.

"Drop them guns!" Van snapped at them, jerking the door open.

The four halted as if they had run against a stone wall in the dark. Kid McBride, more panicky than the rest perhaps, involuntarily pulled the trigger, and Van Patten brought him down with a bullet through his shoulder.

"*Drop them guns,* I said!"

The guns dropped, their barrels digging into the mud.

"Sorry I had to hurt one of you, but he had it coming. Mrs. Logan, will you come out and pick up these guns? You three can step to one side, away from them. All right, just there will be fine. I want to speak a little piece to you folks."

Mrs. Logan, her gun very much in evidence and ready to her hand, came briskly out and began picking up the guns as she would gather chips, and stowing them in her apron.

"We're not making war on our neighbors," she

said half apologetically, "but you're in mighty bad company this morning, when you come with Jess Logan, and we'll have to keep these guns till things is settled. And the settlement is going to be had with Jess." With that she carried the guns back into the house, an expression of extreme satisfaction on her face.

"Now, I'm ready to talk turkey to you fellows; especially Logan," said Van. "I know what he told you boys about me, but it ain't the truth and I'm going to prove it. I'm not a spy for the stockmen. I came down here for a horse that — got away from me, a couple of weeks ago. I heard he was in the Wall, so I came down after him. That's all, and when I get him I'll go on back about my business — which has nothing whatever to do with you fellows."

"What fer lookin' horse is it?" Slim Jeffrey was inquisitive enough to ask. "What brand does he carry?"

Van's eyes did not move away from the three.

"We'll come to that later," he said shortly. "I'm prepared to prove ownership, all right.

"I want to talk to Logan, first thing. You three fellows all knew Mary Logan — Parker, her

real name is. Hayfoot, you told me the old man said she was killed by a horse. That right?"

"That's what I was told," Heyford replied, unemotional as a gambler when the cards are running against him.

"Either of you boys come to the funeral?"

"We was both here," Slim Jeffrey told him, indicating the fallen Kid McBride with a downward glance.

"Yeah. So you know there was a funeral, but you didn't see her, did you? In the coffin, I mean."

"No, her dad said she wasn't — seeable. Face smashed, he said." Slim Jeffrey was stepping uneasily, his eyes inquiring dumbly the meaning of it all.

"Well, I'm going to give you a chance to look into that coffin, if you want to. I'd like to know what it was he buried — for it sure wasn't Mary."

Even the wounded Kid emitted a surprised oath. But Logan gave a bestial kind of bellow and lunged toward the porch, his hands working like claws making ready to tear Van's throat.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "She's dead and

buried — and she comes out of the river to torment ——"

"Mary," Van called softly, without turning his head, and Mary Parker came out and stood before them, her arm around her mother, who followed her close.

At the sight of her, Logan gave a hoarse scream, turned and fled down toward the meadow, both arms flung up as if he would ward off some unnamed horror that pursued him. Van sent him a fleeting glance and let him go.

"He tried to drown Mary," he told the others. "He must have buried rocks in that coffin. You all know how he's been acting since then. After I came on the scene he was all right till yesterday morning. Then he saw me talking to Mrs. Logan over by the well, and he began to abuse her and call her crazy. I threw a bucket of milk at him, and he went off to drum up some of you Wall boys to come and do his killing for him.

"That's plain enough, isn't it? All he had to do was tell you I'm a spy, and you'd take care of the rest."

"That's all right, Van," Heyford said calmly, "but what's to prove you ain't one? That dep-

uty story you told me don't jibe with the horse story you just now told. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. That deputy story was true, Bill. Snub Epperson will tell you, if you want to ask him. Or you might wire the sheriff in Paradise and say you know where Van Patten is. He'll likely offer you something for the information. They had me in jail for shooting Ches Baker, and I batted the deputy over the head and beat it. He's after me like a wolf — or so I heard in Lost Cabin. Somebody told him I was down here, and the last I heard he was headed this way."

"That's right," Slim Jeffrey suddenly affirmed. "I didn't know you was Van Patten when old Pitchfork told us about the cattleman's spy that had come to his ranch. I heard that feller askin' about you, up in Lost Cabin. Showed us the scar in his hair, where he said you hit him. That lets you out, far as I'm concerned."

"Thanks," Van drawled. "On the strength of that, maybe you'll help round up Mrs. Logan's stock. They want to leave the Wall and go back where they came from, and they don't want to let Logan get away with everything. It belongs

to Mrs. Logan; was hers when she married him.

"They tell me that he made away with the boy, and claimed he ran away. You know now that he tried to murder Mary, and make you believe she was killed accidentally by a horse. He's a bad *hombre*, and the sooner they're out of his way the better. He'll kill them both if he gets the chance."

"He'll have to be real fast with a gun, if he gets in the first shot when we meet," little Mrs. Logan declared fiercely. "I'm a patient woman, and I never killed anybody in my life, but I'll shoot him on sight!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"A HORSE DON'T LIE ——"

SLIM JEFFREY looked at her and suddenly gave a loud, boyish "Haw-haw-haw!"

"That's the stuff!" he cried approvingly. "And I'll save yuh the trouble, Mis' Logan, if I see him 'fore you do." His eyes, fixed on Mary with frank admiration, grew sober. "A skunk like him ain't fitten to live! You wait till the Wall hears about his tryin' to drownd Mary, and then callin' us all to the funeral! They'll string him up to the nearest limb, that's what!"

"Darn right," Bill Heyford agreed. "You folks can sure count on me to help yuh out, any way I can. You needn't worry about your stock — we'll see that it's gathered for you and headed outa the valley in any direction you say. The Wall may have a tough name with outsiders, but we ain't quite as bad as they try to make out. Not if we're treated right." He looked at Van Patten and grinned.

"Don't blame you, Van, for holding us up. You was justified, under the circumstances. We sure did perforate that dummy you rigged up for our benefit, and I guess the laugh's on us."

"You never heard of me spying, did you?"

"Don't know as I ever did," Heyford admitted after a pause. "But about that horse — you'll sure have to prove ownership, old-timer. There's several new horses in the Wall, and the boys ain't going to turn 'em over just on any man's say-so. Why, that brown of mine, he's a new one I bought from a feller up toward Lost Cabin. I wouldn't part with him for a good deal ——"

"Not if I proved to the three of you that he belongs to me?"

Heyford's eyes narrowed.

"Well, it'd sure take more'n your word," he stated dryly. "I think a lot of that horse. He's sure well broke and a dandy cayuse."

"Yeah, breaking horses is my trade," Van retorted.

"He ain't wearin' your brand."

"How do you know? Brand's blotched, ain't it?"

To that Bill Heyford said nothing, but his face

hardened and Van knew that he would never give up the horse if he could help it.

"Hey, Query!" he called, and when the horse threw up his head and looked toward the sound, he called again. "Query! Come here, old boy. Come, Query!"

While they watched, the horse turned his head sidewise so that the reins would not drag under his feet, and came trotting up to the group, hesitated, and came straight to Van as he stepped down from the porch with his hand outstretched.

"A horse don't lie," Van said, and he ran his palm caressingly over the sleek neck. "I'm sorry you got let in for it, Hayfoot, and I'm willing to pay you whatever you're out on the deal."

"Oh, that's all right," Heyford said, still the good gambler. "The horse says he's yours, and I guess he ought to know."

"Better help your friend into the house," Van cheerfully invited, letting the subject of the horse rest there, as if Heyford's tacit yielding of the point were final. "I don't think he's hurt very bad, but I had to stop his shooting until we saw how we was coming out. Hit right next his collar bone, unless I've forgotten how to shoot."

"Yes, come on in, boys, and have breakfast," Mrs. Logan hospitably urged them. "A cup of hot coffee and some pancakes will take the chill out of your bones from laying up there on that wet ridge with the bushes drippin' on you, goodness knows how long. Mary, darlin', go fix Jess' bed up for Kid. Poor boy — but he shouldn't have fired when he did."

Slim Jeffrey stooped and half lifted the wounded Kid McBride to his feet, and with one arm flung over his shoulder helped him into the house. Bill Heyford, still wearing the expressionless look of the gambler, walked forward to where Van Patten was patting Query.

Over the back of the horse the two men eyed each other. A bleak look came into Heyford's eyes.

"What'll you take for the horse, Van?" he asked. "I sure do hate to part with him."

"There ain't money enough in the State of Wyoming to buy him, Hayfoot."

"That because I want him?"

"No," said Van, looking him straight in the eye. "It's because the little woman who broke him to ride cried herself sick when she lost him.

I promised her I'd get him back, and I generally keep my promises. I don't suppose you knew Lea Moore, did you, Hayfoot? Daughter of old T Down Moore. Well, this horse belongs to her and I've got to take him back. She raised him from a colt, broke him herself and always rode him."

"Yeah?" Bill Heyford's eyes faltered. "I didn't know all that, Van. If it's the truth ——"

"It is, Hayfoot. He's one of the LM herd that her husband, Ches Baker, stole from her to buy a saloon down in Paradise. You know what happened to him up in Lost Cabin. I took the herd home, and come back after Query. That's the straight goods."

Heyford busied himself with a cigarette.

"What're yuh telling me all this for?" he asked, looking up at Van while he drew the tip of his tongue along the edge of the paper.

"Because, Hayfoot, none of us is as bad as we try to make out. I don't believe you'd have helped haze them LM horses outa Snub Epperson's corral, if you'd known they belonged to Lea Moore. And I don't believe you'd have roped this horse outa the herd, up on the hill outside

town, if you'd known she broke him herself and rode him to look after the bunch. You'd have taken him back to her, quick as I would."

Heyford lighted his cigarette, his eyes studiously avoiding Van's direct gaze.

"I expect I would," Heyford finally confessed, his mouth tilting downward at the corners in a cynical grin. "I ain't no saint, but hell, I'm part human." He took a puff or two. "Van, you sure are a smooth cuss. You know damn' well you've got me tied hand an' foot — and I'd 'a' swore you'd never get this horse outa the Wall."

Van grinned at him over Query's silky-maned neck.

"I know it, Bill. I knew there was just one way to get him and that's tell you the truth about him. So I spread the cards." He laughed suddenly and boyishly. "If that darn deputy does glom me and make me high-tail it back to Paradise, I guess I'll have to turn the job over to you of getting Query back to the LM ranch. And," he added, "if I have to hide out here in the Wall, I guess you and me'd get along all right together from now on."

Heyford shook his head in mock dissent.

"Dunno about that. Guess I'll ride wide of your trail hereafter. Too damn' slick. You'd talk the shirt off'n my back, darn yuh!"

"That being the case, maybe I can talk you into helping me get Mrs. Logan's stock out of here and down to wherever she wants to go. I don't know what all she's got ——"

"Three or four hundred head of cattle, and between fifty and sixty head of horses. Yeah, I expect I'm roped in on the job. Women is the very devil for gettin' hard work out of a man." The glance he sent toward Mary as she came out on to the porch held no resentment, however.

"Don't you think some one ought to go after Jess?" she asked, coming down to where they stood with Query. "I suppose I'm a regular 'fraid-cat,' but I feel as if he'll pounce out of the brush any minute. He — I'm afraid he'll try to make a good job of it, the next time!"

"He won't do a thing, Miss — Parker. Don't you worry a minute about old Pitchfork. He'll never come around here no more, and I'll bet money on it." He looked down at her with a little smile in his eyes. "Want me to ride down toward the field and see where he went to?"

"Oh, I wish you would! You can track him all right in this wet grass, can't you? If he just keeps on going, I don't care; but I feel all the while that he's watching from the bushes here ——" She paled at the very thought as her eyes turned fearfully toward the grove that seemed so close and menacing to her that morning.

"He'll keep on going," Heyford silkily assured her. "I promise you won't be packed off — not by him, anyway. Save some breakfast for me, will you — Mary?"

"I sure will, even if it turns out to be dinner!" Her birdlike glance went gratefully to his face, her lips trembling into a smile.

Bill Heyford turned smiling to the horse; remembered, and bit his lip as he glanced at Van Patten.

Answering the look, Van placed the reins in his hand and stepped back.

"Keep the coffee hot, 'cause I won't be long," Bill said, as he swung into the saddle, wheeled and loped away in the direction Logan had taken.

The two stood and watched him go; Mary thinking how wonderful it was to have a cham-

pion ready to ride at her bidding like the knights of old, and Van Patten wondering if he had made a mistake in trusting Hayfoot Bill with that precious bit of horseflesh. He did not think so. That last sentence had sounded to him like a promise, veiled but nevertheless given in good faith.

Mary watched him out of sight before she turned and went into the house to help her mother. Van Patten sat himself down on the edge of the porch, kicking the dummy off to make room, and lighted a cigarette while he waited and watched. It was possible that Mary's fears were well founded, and that old Logan would circle back to an ambush in the grove, though the man's stark terror at sight of Mary made the ruse seem unlikely.

The chance furnished an excuse, however, and Van meant to avail himself of it. He could not go in until he knew for a certainty that Hayfoot Bill would come back. Faith, he told himself, is all very well when its betrayal brings no great catastrophe, but it weakens under a test such as this. He had no doubt that Hayfoot had meant to play fair when he started off — but once in the

saddle and away from the house, temptation would perhaps wean him away from his good intentions.

Van wished he had not been quite so trusting. He ought to have gone along. It would not have taken him five minutes to saddle Spider, and Hayfoot would have had no excuse for not waiting that long.

Van was working himself into a fine state of nervous apprehension and had smoked two cigarettes, when from down in the meadow came faintly the sound of a shot. He was on his feet and running toward the shed where he had left his horses before the echo of the report came mockingly from the surrounding hills.

He was on Spider bareback and loping down to the meadow when he met Heyfoot Bill riding up at an easy canter. The two exchanged swift inquiring glances, and Van turned and rode alongside the Wall outlaw. His very silence bristled with questions, but Heyford took his own time about speaking.

"Guess old Pitchfork was about half looney," he observed at last, when Van was on the point of questioning him outright. "He was down at

the foot of the hill at the lower edge of the meadow, heavin' rocks to beat the band, piling 'em on top of a heap that looked mighty suspicious to me; kinda like something was buried there. Wouldn't be s'prised if it was that boy that disappeared a while back."

Van knew better than to say anything just then.

"Had breakfast yet?" Heyford turned and gave him one long, level look.

"Not yet, Bill," said Van.

"S'pose we might as well ride a circle, right after we eat," Bill continued. "Mary and her mother's both anxious to git out the Wall, I expect, and you'll be wantin' to git this hammer-headed old skate back where he belongs."

"You said it, Bill."

"Yeah," said Bill pointedly, "I said enough, I reckon."

"Plenty."

They rode along in complete silence until they were in hailing distance of the house. Mary stood on the porch, and when she saw them coming she beckoned, then cupped her palms beside her red mouth and called "Breakfast!" for good measure.

Bill Heyford's whole face lighted amazingly at sight of her and he waved answer.

"Beat you to the house," he challenged, as he leaned in the saddle.

"Bet a dollar you don't!" Van retorted, and lay along the neck of his big sorrel.

They hurtled up, the two horses running nose to nose and stopping in two stiff-legged jumps before a select and excited audience of one.

"It's a tie, it's a tie!" she cried gleefully, before the black shadow of her fear swept back over her mood. "Did — did you see him?" she asked Bill.

"Yeah, just got a glimpse of him. Don't think you need to worry none about *him,* no more." With a peculiar gleam in his eyes, Bill smiled down at her. "He's gone — plumb outa the Wall by this time, I expect. Way he was headed, he never will come back if he can help it."

"Oh, I'm so glad and thankful!" sighed Mary, never noticing the gleam but seeing only the smile. "You're — sure?"

"Dead certain. You don't think I'd take a chance — after what he done to you?" Bill had dismounted and was walking toward her, still smiling.

"Oh — well, come on in while the coffee's hot!"

Van Patten, glancing from her flushed cheeks to the revealing light in Bill's eyes, gave a little chuckle and went into the house. One Wall outlaw, he told himself wisely, was in a fair way to being tamed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HAYFOOT HATES TO BACH

"I SHA'N'T move a step away from this ranch," said Mrs. Logan, as she flipped golden-brown pancakes with a dexterity born of long practice, "till that poor boy is able to ride. So you can take your time about rounding up the stock. Mary and I have got a lot of packing to do, anyway. And the rozberries are going to be ready to start canning in a couple of days; what the hail didn't pound to pieces."

She brought the plate of cakes to the table, where Mary was pouring the coffee, her brown hair smoothly braided in one long braid which was tied with a big red bow and hung over her shoulder to her waist. Mary was a pretty girl, this morning, with a flush in her cheeks to match the bow on her hair.

"We can hitch up the team an' haul him home," Slim Jeffrey proposed. Slim was plainly averse to the idea of having Kid remain with the Logans, a wounded young giant for Mary to wait

on with gentle pity which might turn to love. According to Slim's meager knowledge of the romantic side of life, this was a foregone conclusion.

"No, you can't do no such a thing!" Mrs. Logan firmly squelched him. "That boy needs a woman's care, and he's going to have it. Jim McBride would daub the wound with axle grease same as he would a horse, and let it go at that. There can't nobody be shot down in my own dooryard and say afterwards I didn't doctor him up to the best of my ability. Kid is going to stay right in that bed till he's well."

"What if old Pitchfork comes back?" Slim Jeffrey was not one to yield without a struggle. "Looks to me like we better git you folks outa here quick as possible."

"Bill says Jess is getting out of the Wall as fast as he can go," Mary spoke up, siding with her mother, to the secret distress of Slim.

"That so? What's to hinder his coming back?"

All eyes turned to Heyford, who calmly spooned sugar into his coffee and stirred it.

"He got his orders to get out and stay out," Bill said, when he realized that they were waiting

for him to answer the question. "He won't come back."

"Where was he headed for?" Slim persisted, curiosity being one of his outstanding characteristics.

"Didn't say. Back where he come from, I expect. I know I couldn't foller him; not on horseback, anyway."

"Might run into him when we take out the stock," Jim tactlessly pursued the subject.

"I wouldn't worry none about it," Bill said dryly. "Cross your bridges when yuh come to 'em, Slim. Pitchfork Logan won't bother this ranch no more, or I miss my guess a mile. He thought Mary was a ghost. When she come right outa the house in broad daylight, that settled his hash, far as hangin' around here is concerned. Forgit him, is my advice."

"Oh, I'll forget him, all right — unless he comes in shooting distance!" Mrs. Logan promised darkly.

"Well, he won't." Bill reached for the honey. "Going to take your milk cows, Mis' Logan? First time I've tasted real cream in a month uh Sundays."

Grace Balloch Memorial Library
Spearfish, S. Dak.

"I don't know yet what I'm going to take."

Van Patten lifted his eyes quickly to her face. Something in her tone arrested his attention. His glance wandered around the kitchen, spotless and with the morning sun shining aslant through the east windows. The pleasant aroma of coffee and hot cakes was in the air and the clatter of breakfast formed a cheerful contrast to the silent gloom which had pervaded the place when he first came.

He looked at Mary, filling Hayfoot's cup with a deluge of thick cream and giggling irrepressibly at something he was saying to her in an undertone. At Slim Jeffrey grinning at her in frank adoration, never seeming to see what was building under his very eyes, but hopeful with the sublime egotism of the young male who takes it for granted he can win wherever his fancy leads him to pursue.

"I don't believe you folks need me very bad," he said, breaking into a temporary silence. "If you don't ——"

"I guess we can git along all right," Bill Heyford drawled. "Like to have yuh stay, all right, but it's liable to be a month before the folks are

ready to pull up and leave; mebby longer, if Ma Logan does all she's got laid out to do."

"Well, I dunno as I'll go at all," Mrs. Logan announced, with unexpected vigor. "Getting Mary back, and getting rid of Jess kinda puts a different face on things. Here I've got feed and water and all the range I want, and a good home — now I've got it to myself — and I'm getting too old to trail outa here and settle down again amongst strangers. If I can get somebody to stay here steady and run the ranch for me——"

"Say, I've been wonderin' how you was goin' to git rid of me," Bill Heyford grinned up at her, while he buttered his sixth cake. "I shore am tired of my own cookin', I tell yuh those!"

"Well, I must say I couldn't ask for a better, more dependable man——"

"Oh, I don't know," Slim Jeffrey discounted, with heavy sarcasm. "I'm purty good at ranchin', myself!" He cast a glowering glance at Bill. "I ain't one of these kinda fellers that has got to ride a horse to do the milkin'!"

"If mother's going to stay in the Wall, she needs a man," said Mary, cruelly frank. "Bill has had lots of experience."

That settled Slim. Very red and hurt and angry, he pushed back his chair and stalked out, leaving Mary to defend herself against her mother's expostulations. The law of hospitality was sacred to Mrs. Logan, and to offend a guest was a sin not easily condoned.

Van went out, smiling to himself, and the three did not so much as realize that he was gone. No, they didn't need him very badly, he told himself with a feeling of relief. Bill was amply able to handle any situation that might arise, and it was not Van Patten's affair if Hayfoot became a fixture on the ranch. Mary might do worse, he thought generously.

For himself, delay suddenly began to harry him like a slave-driver's lash. He led out Riley and watered him and Spider at the river, which ran murkily after the storm and lapped high upon the bank. He must have a little food. Plans began to form in his mind while he brought out his blankets from the bunk house and folded them meticulously for the pack. He wondered whether Hayfoot would resent having his saddle taken off Query. Van decided to risk it, if Hayfoot stayed in the house much longer.

He was leading Spider and Riley up to the porch when Bill appeared, walking on air — if one may use an old simile.

"Say, Van, I'd like to have yuh do a little errand for me if yuh will," Heyford began, awkwardly casual. "You'll go through Casper, won't yuh? I wisht you'd buy me a marriage license if it ain't too much trouble. Mary and me is going to git married, and it'll save a darn long ride — and a chancey one." He gave Van a swift, revealing look.

"Yeah; sure I'll get you a dozen, if you say so, Bill. I oughta send a sky pilot along too, hadn't I?"

"No," drawled Bill, "we got one, thanks just the same. One was hazed in here for shootin' a man down Laramie way, and us Wall folks kinda keep him handy by in case of a funeral or some such thing. You send up the license to Mike Moran at Lost Cabin an' he'll see I git it, all right. Better leave word as yuh go out, so Mike can be ready to shoot it right down to me soon as it gits in on the stage."

"Kinda in a hurry, ain't you, Hayfoot?" Van's tone was mildly jeering.

"No more'n what you are yourself, Van. You know damn' well you ain't high-tailin' it outa here because you're afraid Wall grass don't agree with them horses of yourn. I'm wise to you!"

"Well," grinned Van, "if you are, just pull your saddle off that brown horse, and then go ask Mary if I can borrow back enough of my grub to last me to Lost Cabin. She can keep the rest to fall back on in case you turn out to be a poor provider."

"Say, you go to hell, will yuh?" Heyford laughingly requested as he turned to do Van's bidding.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MARRIAGE LICENSES FOR TWO, PLEASE!

In the parlor of the Casper House, little Marylee Baker knelt on a chair with her arms folded on the window sill, gazing rapturously out upon the passers-by while her mother talked tiresome business with a man whom Marylee did not particularly like. Passers-by were not so many at that late hour of the afternoon, and Marylee could hear the clup-clup-clup of hoofs when riders came down the street half a block away. At such exciting sounds she would lean far out, clinging to the grimy sill with her chubby fingers, and try to read the brands on the horses before they passed, calling each one importantly over her shoulder to her mother.

"Vere's a V7 comin' along, an' a man wif funny ol' fiskers all over his face!" she announced. "Big ol' speckle-face horse, get along vere! My wittle pony can go faster van you can."

"Mustn't say unkind things, baby — not even

to horses," her mother reproved her, and Marylee subsided, watching the street and keeping her opinions to herself.

But suddenly she gave a squeal and a bounce.

"God-bless-Van Patten is a-comin', an' he's got Query! Oh, call him, Mamma, call him! Oo-oh, it's Query comin'!" Then she gave a wail. "Ooh, a nasty ol' fweight outfit's in the way! Call him, Mamma!"

Lea Baker ran to the window and looked, but the rumbling string of freight wagons, the horses with bells on, jangled along next the sidewalk. If there were a rider beyond the covered wagons she could not see him; nor could he hear her if she called.

"It's Query, Mamma! It's Query an' it's my friend!"

Lea caught her lip between her teeth, glanced up and down the street rather wildly, and then she did an odd thing, in the opinion of the man in the big, patent rocker. She pursed her lips and whistled — high, shrill above the clamor of the bells and the creak and rumble of the passing wagons.

Van did not hear, just at first, but Query's quick

ears caught the sound and he stopped, pulling at the lead rope that had never tightened on the trail.

Van looked back and saw him, head up, eyes seeking anxiously. Abruptly he threw up his head and whinnied, and as the call ceased, Van heard the whistle, plainly enough this time, since in the brief halt the freight team had pulled on past.

"Van! Over here!" Lea was leaning from the window now, waving her hand as frantically as Marylee.

Van waved his hand, rode up to the curb and dismounted, clanking across the sidewalk to stand beneath the window. His face wore an expression of blank surprise.

"What wind blew you folks here?" he demanded whimsically.

"Why, the winds of chance, I'd say, if I wanted to be real clever. I came up to settle some things about the property, and see just where I stood in a business way. Then I ran across a man who knows of other property Ches owned down in Colorado, and I was going down there on the night train. I'd have missed you altogether, I'm

afraid, only for Marylee. You've got Query, I see." One often says unnecessary things under stress of sudden emotion.

"Yeah, I got him all right. Well, I'll see you later."

"No, come on in. There's a lot I want to talk about, and some of it won't keep. The horses will be all right for half an hour. They don't look so terribly tired."

"No, they ain't. But I've got something I'm in a hurry to attend to — before the county clerk locks up."

"What's so urgent at the county clerk's office, Van?"

"Well, I want to get a marriage license, and it's getting late."

Lea caught her breath, blushed hotly and then laughed. She leaned farther out, so that the man in the room could not hear without making an obvious effort to do so.

"I ought to say this is rather sudden, but I won't. You ought to have gotten that license seven years ago, instead of riding off somewhere to sulk, but I suppose now you've made up your mind, you *are* in a kind of a hurry. Don't you

want me to go along? I'll bet you've forgotten how old I am!"

Van Patten blinked, blushed a dark crimson and nodded dumbly. Then, swallowing a lump in his throat:

"I wouldn't 'a' had the nerve to ask you, Lea — not the way it's s'posed to be done."

"Then I'd have been compelled to ask you, I'm afraid. I've decided that I simply must have you, Van, to help me run the ranch."

The giddiness had left Van Patten's brain, so that he could laugh sanely.

"I knew a widow woman that married a man for a foreman, and it didn't turn out so well. But I guess maybe, in this case ——"

"This widow woman has been a widow in fact for a great deal longer than the month Ches has been dead," Lea answered steadily. "If you think I'm not showing proper respect ——"

"For that coyote? Say, let's not mention him no more, Lea. It makes my gorge rise to think of him."

"We won't, any more." She turned her head to look into the room. "The clerk's office won't close for nearly an hour. Go put up the horses,

and Marylee and I will be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Can't we get married ——"

"If we can find the judge, I suppose we can." Lea's cheeks were still hot, but there was a happy shine in her eyes. Run along — I *need* fifteen minutes to adjust my mind!"

Van gave her one eloquent look and mounted his horse, surreptitiously pinching one arm — for reasons of his own.

Inside the parlor, Lea Baker stood sparkly-eyed before her caller, making her excuses with what poise was left her.

"I'm afraid this is going to change my plans, Mr. Pearson. Mr. Van Patten has returned unexpectedly, and we are going to be married this evening, so I shall not take the train to Paradise with you. I suppose I can give you a power of attorney and let you close up the business down there for me. I want everything sold, and the money, less your commission, may be deposited here in the Stockmen's Bank." She hesitated, the happy flush rising again in her cheeks.

"Would you like to — to go and see us married, Mr. Pearson?"

"Don't believe I can. Sorry, too. But I've got a lot to 'tend to before train time, and —— Tell you what you do, Mrs. Baker. You make out that power of attorney an' mail it to me in Paradise, if I don't git to see you again before train time. Don't s'pose I will — you'll be busy. You just mail the papers to Walter Pearson, Paradise, Colorado, and I'll do the best I can for yuh. I — I wish you luck — er — much joy an' happiness ——"

Spluttering a bit to form the proper phrases, Walt Pearson backed out of the room and out of Van Patten's affairs. A born politician was Walt, and never the man to spoil a wedding.

And so Van Patten's dream came true. Here he was, twenty-eight years old in a very few more months, and he could ride out and watch the LM horses feed contentedly in the pasture that lay up the creek toward the canyon. With what money he had saved — he had never been a spendthrift and a Denver bank could tell you of his savings account there — he planned to start raising cattle on the open range beyond the LM ranch. A hundred head of young cows to start with, he told

Lea. And he would break the horses before they were sold, and get top price in the market. He would extend the ditches and raise more hay — oh, he planned great things for the LM ranch and for Lea and little Marylee!

One tragedy marked that summer. Marylee's "wittle pony" crumpled his knees under him one night, and laid down and died. Marylee cried for two entire days, and then consented to transfer her affections to Riley, and with that loss happily replaced, life flowed on smoothly, steeped in a great content.

THE END

Date Due

SEP 23 '72	AP 9'77	JY 24'88	
JAN 29 '73	DE 22'77	SE 13'89	
MY 9'73	MR 28'78	Sept 27'89	
MY 17'73	AP 10'78		
SEP 20'73	NOV 22 '78	MR 15'90	
OC 8'73	DE 29'78	OC 23'90	
OC 22'73	MAR 12'79	AP - 2'01	
NO 17'73	MAY 21 '80	FE 15'93	
DE 3'73	JUN 7 '80	AP 8'93	
JA 3'74	SEP 20 '80	OC 1 '96	
JA 31'74	OCT 31 '80	JY 26'97	
MR 30'74	MAR 21 '81	AP - 2'01	
OC 10'74	JA 3'83	MY 23'09	
FE 20'75	JY 23'87		
AUG 14 '75	JUN 2'88		
SE 20'75	NO 16'88		
SE 7'78			

Demco 38-297

Western.

FW
B67
Bow

8691

Bower, B. M.
Van Patten.

Grace Balloch Memorial Library
Spearfish, S. Dak.